

Additional material
NSW Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues
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Introductory comments

Schools have a duty of care to provide a safe environment for their students and their staff.

However, large numbers of female teachers and female students are subjected to sexual harassment in schools.

Some teachers in our survey (and in private communications) report they have changed schools, or plan to leave the profession, or have left the profession as a result of sexual harassment and other harmful sexual behaviours by students in schools. Some suffer ongoing mental health issues as a result of the inappropriate behaviours they were subjected to.

Sexual Harassment of Teachers [SHoT] Report (Collective Shout/Maggie Dent, November 2025)

Between 2022-2023, Collective Shout and parenting expert and educator Maggie Dent conducted a national survey of teachers to gain a better understanding of the prevalence of sexual harassment in Australian schools. More than 1000 responded.

Teachers – almost all female – reported being subjected to routine sexual harassment. They were propositioned, threatened with rape, subjected to sexist slurs and mimicking of sex acts seen in pornography. While trying to just do their jobs, they were sexually moaned, groaned, and grunted at, asked for nudes and intimidated. Many said they did not feel safe at work.

I refer further to findings from the SHoT survey below.

The nature of incidents in schools

SHoT survey respondents indicated it was overwhelmingly male students engaging in these behaviours towards female teachers and female students.

Teachers in our survey relayed the following:

“Social media plays a bit [sic] part in it. I experienced online stalking, seeking images to be edited sexually, repeated continued comments made publicly in classrooms including encouraging other students to stalk online for images, threats of obtaining photos without my consent etc.

“Avoided public places such as the local gym and functions where the student was present in fear of being photographed.”

“Greater education on what is an appropriate joke and what is unacceptable, better follow up from schools around investigating and resolving (although I acknowledge that their workload is already extreme) and communication with parents on every incident. I believe the parents of the student who stalked/harassed me would have been mortified if they were aware of their young man’s behaviour but as far as I could ascertain they were never notified. Parents have such a big role in modelling, redirecting, reinforcing appropriate behaviour. It should not be seen as a school problem, but a social problem.”

One respondent noted that there has been an “increase in reports of sexual harassment generally but particularly that which involves image-based sexual abuse e.g. revenge porn and threatening to share nudes.” Another respondent commented that boys were making ‘deepfake porn’ [Deepfake Image Based Sexual Abuse] of classmates.

Generally speaking, evidence around teacher-targeted sexual harassment remains limited in part due to limitations in sexual harassment data collection and reporting within schools. This includes a minimisation of reporting due to concerns about damaging a school’s reputation, or teachers fearful for their own safety (Kor et al., 2023).

Evidence suggests that in some cases, experiences of sexual harassment may be misclassified or misreported as something less serious. For example, Astor and colleagues (2023), in examining teacher victimisation, classified the experience of receiving obscene remarks and gestures (experienced by over two-thirds of respondents) separately from sexual harassment (experienced by around 7%).

Response to incidents

Survey respondents reported that incidents of sexual harassment of teachers are typically “swept under the rug,” while “harassment festers in silence.” Sexual harassment is a taboo topic - teachers are generally not comfortable talking about it.

When asked the question “If you did not report the sexual harassment, can you say why not?”, 19.0% of respondents said they “did not think any action would be taken.” A total of 4.8% said they were “unsure how to report/who to report to” (see more on barriers to reporting below).

Teachers also observed inadequate responses to the sexual harassment of female students.

“Too many times I’ve seen male students get away with a warning for really inappropriate sexual behaviour towards female students because ‘they’re too young’, ‘just boys being boys’, ‘just being silly’ and ‘didn’t know what they were doing’.”

“The boys think it is a joke and the girls are made to think that they need to just accept it as nothing will be done about it.”

“A Year 7 [boy] was harassed by a Year 11, when he ‘joked’ about inviting [him] to suck his ‘lollipop’ while gesturing to his penis. After a week’s suspension, the dad defended his 16yo son at his re-entry interview saying it wasn’t sexual harassment and that it’s just ‘boys being boys’.”

Teachers noted that students themselves see sexual harassment as “funny” or “jokes” and do not understand how serious it is, even when explained to them. Survey respondents were sometimes “laughed at” when they called it out. In line with research, survey respondents described a range of attitudes that excuse, minimise, or ignore sexual harassment.

Barriers to Reporting

We know from the SHoT report that a significant number of female teachers may be afraid to report their experience of sexual harassment, fear reprisals, have reported before and nothing was done, or say the matter was made worse after they reported. (The SHoT survey was anonymous, which enabled teachers to speak more freely).

Insufficient training about what constitutes sexual harassment is leading to behaviour being normalised and therefore not reported or taken seriously. Survey respondents reported that teachers and students are “dismissed” or “insulted” for being upset by or reporting the behaviours. Typical comments from students, parents, other teachers and leaders include: “It’s just poor behaviour choices,” “It’s a phase,” “You’re over-reacting,” and “There’s not enough proof.”

The available literature also identifies insufficient training about what constitutes sexual harassment as a barrier to reporting. (Kor et al., 2023). For women teachers, the issue is often dismissed by other adults accepting boys’ excuses that ‘it’s a joke,’ or staff believing it’s just ‘boys being boys’ (Sparrow, 2024).

SHoT survey respondents indicated feeling unsafe after reporting sexual harassment - 58.9% of teachers who reported sexual harassment felt unsafe afterward. This data highlights the pervasive impact of sexual harassment on teachers’ sense of security in their work environment. Among those who did not report their experience, almost half still felt unsafe after the incident.

Asked to describe their school’s response or action following teacher reports of sexual harassment, it was reported that “no action at all” was taken in 23.0% of cases where a respondent reported being sexually harassed. A total of 42.8% of respondents described the school’s response as “not adequate,” while only 9.3% felt the response was “a good resolution.”

Another barrier to reporting was that survey respondents were unsure of their school’s reporting processes. When asked the question “What measures are currently in place to ensure students and teachers are aware of reporting processes?” a total of 36.4% answered either “unsure,” “none” or “not sure.” One survey respondent highlighted the barrier to reporting for relief teachers. They reported “probably a number of [measures] but as I work across multiple schools, I’m not always familiar with the processes.”

Our data is mirrored by the Australian Education Union’s research in 2019. In its submission to the Australian Human Rights Commission’s National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces, the AEU highlighted that the majority of teachers do not report

experiences of sexual harassment in their workplace (AEU, 2019). The AEU submission did not identify whether those engaging in sexual harassment were students or colleagues, however it did provide information about barriers to reporting in a broader sense. The AEU noted that the primary reason respondents to its survey cited for not reporting was that they “did not feel comfortable,” followed by “worried it would make the situation worse.” A total of 10% reported “fear of not being believed.”

The AEU also noted that teachers who did report sexual harassment said that reporting resulted in adverse impacts to their employment conditions, including reduced hours or non-renewal of contracts (AEU, 2019). The majority (78%) of those who reported felt the matter was not resolved to their satisfaction (AEU, 2019).

Similarly, the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) reported in 2018, in related to workplaces more broadly in Australia, that “almost one in five people who made a formal report or complaint were labelled as a troublemaker (19%), were ostracised, victimised, or ignored by colleagues (18%) or resigned (17%). In one in five cases (19%) the formal report or complaint brought no consequences for the perpetrator.”

Sexual harassment is notoriously underreported in all workplaces. The 2018 AHRC survey reported that only 17% of victims of sexual harassment report abuse in Australian workplaces. This is likely to be compounded significantly in school settings, particularly when teachers are being harassed by students.

In Australian tertiary education workplaces, a 2023 report by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) revealed that only 13% of those experiencing harassment made a formal complaint, with 46% not complaining at all. A concerning 52% were encouraged to drop their complaints, and 44% faced negative consequences from their employers.

There are recent examples of treating criminal behaviour as less serious because it is in a school. One this year in a Victorian private school involved online chats between students, including allegedly sharing CSAM images along with misogynist and racist language. The matter was reported to the police as soon as the school was notified by a parent, however police decided not to continue investigations. Police recommended that the most appropriate course of action was an internal school response, with an emphasis on education and support for the students involved to ensure they understand the seriousness of their actions” (Foladi, 2025).

Impacts on teachers

In addition to significantly harming their personal wellbeing and leading to decisions to leave the profession, the literature highlights how these experiences can seriously undermine teachers’ sense of professionalism and confidence in their capacity to teach. For some teachers, experiences of sexual harassment can rouse feelings of failure or disempowerment and concerns that the broader school community will perceive them as a ‘bad teacher’ (Goldschmidt-Gjerløw and Trysnes, 2020; Robinson, 2000). Robinson (2012, p. 91) suggests that: “For some women teachers, the experience [of sexual harassment] is internalised as their failure to adequately deal with boys’ behaviours and their inability to maintain their culturally legitimised and expected position of power.”

The demeaning nature of sexual harassment, paired with the compromised authority of the teacher by a student, can not only lead to a deep sense of humiliation and shame for victims (Lahelma et al., 2000). It can also lead to avoiding filing a report or taking disciplinary action out of fear or embarrassment (NASUWT, 2019). For some female teachers, physical and verbal aggression of male students was seen to represent a considerable barrier to speaking up about sexual harassment (Kor et al., 2023, p. 2727).