



# NAVIGATING SCHOOL-BASED SEXUAL HARASSMENT

**GIRLS FOR GENDER EQUITY**

In 2011, Girls for Gender Equity (GGE)<sup>1</sup> published *Hey, Shorty! A Guide to Combating Sexual Harassment and Violence in Schools and on the Streets*. This guide was a direct response to the stories and information that GGE participants shared with GGE staff about their experiences in school and their communities. GGE has continued to work alongside young people to combat sexual and street harassment. Below is a summary of what we have learned over the years to support navigating sexual harassment at school.

## WHAT IS SCHOOL-BASED HARASSMENT?

School-based sexual harassment is unwelcome sexual conduct at school. This can include verbal, nonverbal, or physical situations of a sexual nature that interfere with a student's education.<sup>2</sup> School-based sexual harassment can come from students or adults associated with the school community.

Sexual harassment includes, but is not exclusive to touching of a sexual nature; making sexual comments, jokes, or gestures (pinching, slapping, etc.); displaying and/or distributing sexually explicit drawings, pictures, or written materials; calling students sexually charged names; spreading sexual rumors; rating students on sexual activity or performance; or circulating, showing, or creating/circulating digital content of a sexual nature.<sup>3</sup>

## DID YOU KNOW?

1. Sexual harassment is considered a civil rights violation and there are special protections for students under Title IX. In accordance with this law, schools are required to provide supports that prevent and respond to incidents of this nature as they impact its students.<sup>4</sup>
2. Most students report that their schools are not spaces where sexual harassment takes place, however, when direct questions were asked about behaviors that relate to sexual harassment, they overwhelmingly identify as having experienced or witnessed sexual harassment.<sup>5</sup>
3. Sexual harassment involves sexual behaviors, but is not actually about sex - it's about power! People who harass others are acting in a way that communicates aggression and hostility to make someone who they see as inferior feel scared or uncomfortable.
4. As of 2011, 46% of students experience some form of sexual harassment in schools, with 44% of incidents occurring in person, and 30% via social media and/or online.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> GGE is an intergenerational organization that works to end gender-based violence and challenges structural forces -- racism, sexism, transphobia, homophobia, economic inequality -- that work to constrict the freedom, full expression, and rights of trans and cis girls and young women of color, and gender non-conforming/non-binary (GNC/NB) youth of color. Through direct service, policy & organizing and culture change, GGE encourages communities to remove systemic barriers and create opportunities for girls and women to live self-determined lives.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights

<sup>3</sup> AAUW, 2011, *Crossing the Line: Sexual Harassment at School*.

<sup>4</sup> Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972

<sup>5</sup> *Hey, Shorty!* (2011)

<sup>6</sup> AAUW, 2011, *Crossing the Line: Sexual Harassment at School*. Pp. 3.

## DID YOU KNOW? (CONT.)

5. Seven out of ten LGBTQ identified students experience sexual harassment in school based on their sexual orientation, 59.1% experience sexual harassment based on their gender expression and 53.2% based on their gender identity.<sup>7</sup>

6. School-based sexual harassment occurs most often in staircases (57%), hallways (58%), and outside of school property (56%): It was noted that for boys, it happens more frequently in areas that are less populated by both genders, such as the locker room.<sup>8</sup>

## COPING WITH SEXUAL HARASSMENT

As mentioned in “Hey, Shorty”, sexual harassment can, at times, be difficult to address, navigate, and/or respond to in the moment. Someone experiencing or witnessing sexual harassment may be unable to respond as the harassment is happening, may not know how to or have the energy to communicate their discomfort, or may even feel unsafe doing so.

After doing years of work to prevent sexual harassment in New York City public schools, GGE recommends that during and after an experience with sexual harassment you check in with your body, if possible. Remain in tune with what feels safest for you in these moments.

### 1. Revisit your safety plan

- Your safety plan can be a good place to start directly following an experience with sexual harassment. When feeling activated, it can help you to slow down and consider the steps you can take to feel most seen, supported, and safe in school/ on campus. A detailed safety plan will consider things like: safest routes to take to school, between classes, and on your way home. Additionally, it will identify your networks of support, if any, and in what ways you can connect with them when you are feeling unsafe.

### 2. Identify Circles of Support

- For some people, identifying who may be a video call or text away in difficult moments may be a simple task. For others, not so much. For these reasons, begin to assess who, in your school, may be an adult ally. Adult allies are helpful in that they center the experiences of young folks and of survivors-- *they see, hear, and believe you*. They support and honor your immediate and long-term needs-- leveraging their privilege as adults to help you to connect with care, legal support, information, and other resources you may experience difficulties accessing otherwise.
- Remember, depending on their role in your school, an adult ally may also be a mandated reporter. If you have questions about what this could mean, discuss this beforehand with the adult ally you've identified so that you are clear before taking next steps!

### 3. Keep Checking In

- Knowing what your boundaries are during and after an experience with sexual harassment can be difficult. Depending on what you decide you want your next steps to be, you may be asked to share your story at different points in time and with folks and/ or in settings that are unfamiliar. Whatever feelings come up for you around this are **okay**. Continue to check in with yourself and communicate when you need clarity, to pause, and to slow down.

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<sup>7</sup> GLSEN National Climate Survey (2017)

<sup>8</sup> Hey, Shorty! (2011)

<sup>9</sup> An adult ally is someone who lends their support to a young person who has [experienced]... sexual harassment. Allies listen to and trust young people's experiences, opinions, and ideas. Hey, Shorty! (2011), Pp. 10.

## COPING WITH SEXUAL ASSAULT (CONT.)

### 4. Identify Circles of Support

- Need to snuggle up in a cozy blanket? Tune out to a good playlist? Vent to a friend? Whatever self-care means to you, do it. But remember, you don't have to care for yourself alone. Connect with a professional who can help you to process through all that may be coming up for you emotionally. And if doing this one-on-one feels especially vulnerable, doing so in a group setting could also guide in your healing journey!

### 5. Speaking up

- Publicly advocating/speaking out against violence in their school communities may be a tool of liberation for those who have experienced sexual harassment. While giving testimony, launching a campaign, or facilitating a support space may be tools that support you in your own healing journey, you certainly do not have to do so alone! Reach out to organizations like Girls for Gender Equity, who are committed to combating gender-based violence on the community and policy levels to find out more about how your voice can be heard.

### 6. Stay Informed

- In 2011, Girls for Gender Equity published *Hey, Shorty! A Guide to Combating Sexual Harassment and Violence in Schools and on the Streets*. The guide was created with young people and their allies to address issues that young people face around sexual harassment. There are resources for students, educators, parents and community members, as well as first hand stories from young people.

Sexual harassment is often used to bait or test the boundaries of someone perceived to be less powerful. Gender stereotypes and heteropatriarchy allow us to ignore and excuse sexual harassment. Our social acceptance that the public or private abuse of our bodies is what allows dominance to escalate. Sexual harassment is oftentimes a gateway to other gender-based violence - and it is unacceptable.

All young people have a right to learn, grow and thrive in school environments that are free from sexual harassment and violence. These tools are just a handful of solutions for coping with sexual harassment if and when it occurs. We must work together to eradicate sexual harassment and violence before it even begins.

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