

## **'Schools aren't talking about it even though they should be' - Using Personal Construct Psychology to explore what girls feel would make schools safe.**

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Small Scale Research Project

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is a widespread issue, and it has long been recognized that action is needed to address this. Recent reports (e.g., Ofsted, 2021) have highlighted the significance of VAWG and ensuring girls' safety within schools. While current research has examined the extent of VAWG in schools, there has been limited exploration of girls' perspectives on the measures that would enhance their sense of safety in school. This study explored female-identifying pupils' perspectives of what a safe and unsafe school looks like and what can be done to make schools safe. Eight Year 10 female-identifying pupils from two UK secondary schools took part in a Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) interview based on Moran's (2001) Ideal School. Four themes were created using reflexive thematic analysis: (1) 'Schools aren't talking about it (violence) even though they should be', (2) They're 'watching me', (3) Relationships are key and, (4) Schools have a responsibility to intervene. The study highlights the normalisation of violence against women and girls in schools and emphasises the importance of positive relationships with peers and staff, improved relationship education, and staff training in fostering a safer environment. This underscores the role everyone plays in addressing VAWG.

Violence against women and girls describes a range of abuses including bullying and cyberbullying, domestic abuse, sexual assault and harassment, physical violence, forced marriage, female genital mutilation, and stalking (Crown Prosecution Service, 2019). The emotional and psychological impact of violence against women and girls for the victims is significant, resulting in increased vulnerability to stress, self-harm, and low self-esteem (Kelly & Karsna, 2017; Scott & McManus, 2016). Victims of VAWG are at higher risk of suicidal ideation and potential negative outcomes later in life (Gillander Gådin & Stein 2019).

Adolescent girls have been identified globally as particularly vulnerable to violence (United Nations General Assembly, 1993). Whilst boys and girls can experience abuse, studies show that females experience disproportionately more violence than males; teenage girls are five times

more likely to experience violence than teenage boys (Finkelhor et al., 2014). This picture is upheld by UK statistics that reveal that one in five girls and women will experience sexual assault in England and Wales during their lifetime (Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy, 2021).

It is a basic human right for children and young people (CYP) to feel safe (United Nations, 1989) yet VAWG is frequent in UK schools, to the degree that it could be described as normal or even expected (Gillander Gådin & Stein, 2019; Ofsted, 2021). In a survey of 400 girls aged 13 to 18 from across the UK, 67% reported having experienced VAWG from other pupils (Girlguiding, 2021). The endemic nature of VAWG is maintained by teachers' underestimation of the scale of the problem, and by many pupils not seeing the point in reporting incidents (Ofsted, 2021; Department for Education, 2022; Larkin, 1994) risking further

entrenchment of such behaviour as normative. Studies have shown that secondary schools are often the places where social norms are established and acquired, including behaviours normalizing VAWG (Keller et al., 2018; Young et al., 2009).

During the Covid-19 pandemic the 'Everyone's Invited' movement revealed staggering findings on girls' safety in secondary schools in England (Everyone's Invited, 2020). Thousands of testimonies from women and young girls were gathered nationally regarding their experiences of VAWG in schools and colleges (Sweeting et al., 2022). In response, Ofsted's Review (2021; sexual abuse in schools and colleges) highlighted the need to investigate peer-on-peer abuse in schools. The figures from 900 adolescents, aged 13-16, revealed school to be unsafe for students: nearly 90% of girls and 50% of boys had been sent unsolicited explicit videos and/or pictures (Ofsted, 2021); furthermore, 92% of girls had experienced harmful sexual behaviours such as sexist name-calling in schools and 64% of girls had experienced unwanted touching in schools.

Making schools safe has been raised as a key priority by Ofsted in their report (Ofsted, 2021), which defines a safe school as one where school leaders do not allow sexual harassment to take place in school or online and where school staff are able to identify and intervene early to protect CYP. A safe environment is a prerequisite for learning as students who feel unsafe will struggle to engage in higher level thinking and be successful academically (Maslow, 1981). The existence of a disproportionate level of violence against girls is often attributed to the pervasive gender inequality that persists in society. The UN (1993) has historically highlighted VAWG to be a result of long-standing power imbalances between men and women. Research suggests that harmful gender attitudes legitimize VAWG (Yodanis, 2004; Powell, 2010), increase the tolerance and normalization of abuse against girls (Abdullatif, 2021), and are associated with increased occurrences of gender-based violence (McCauley et al., 2013). These findings highlight the wider gender inequalities that persist in society, and the importance of addressing these disparities among adolescents in schools, in order to create safer educational environments.

Girls feel that Relationships, Sex, and Health Education (RSHE) in schools still requires improvement (Girlguiding UK, 2021) and Ofsted (2021) reports stark inconsistencies in the way in which it is being delivered. Teachers are reported to currently not have adequate time, confidence, or knowledge to deliver RSHE effectively (Ofsted, 2021). In response, there has been an emergence of 'toolkits' aimed at tackling gender inequality from an early age. For example, the Expect Respect Healthy Relationships Toolkit (Abdullatif, 2021), provides lessons that challenge gender inequitable views, and the Peer-on-Peer Abuse Toolkit (Smellie et al., 2019) provides a framework for a whole school approach to addressing violence in schools. However, there is currently no indication of whether these toolkits are being used by schools or that they are effective in preventing VAWG. Ofsted's review (2021) and the Girlguiding UK (2021) survey make it clear that more needs to be done to eliminate violence against girls in schools, and whilst the government has since published statutory guidance on RSHE (DfE, 2021), and committed to offering greater support to teachers in delivering the curriculum (HM Government, 2021), there is no indication of how this commitment will be met.

Including girls in the process of change is important and providing support in a manner that is led by what they want is important (Botcherby & Child, 2020). Currently, much of the existing literature successfully captures the scope of the issue of VAWG within educational settings, but very little research captures the views of young girls. Previous research has, however, attempted to explore what contributes to the feeling of safety within schools. For example, a recent quantitative study identified that support from staff and sense of belonging predicted adolescent feelings of school safety (Williams et al., 2018). However, data from this study were collected from a single American school so cannot be generalized to UK schools and some of the measures used in the study lacked validity and reliability. Therefore, the rigour of the findings is questionable. Nevertheless, these findings suggest that multiple factors could increase feelings of safety, warranting further exploration.

This current qualitative study explores how

secondary school pupils describe and identify a safe and unsafe school for girls, by using an adapted version of Moran's (2001) 'Drawing the Ideal Self'. Drawing has been found to be a powerful tool to share personal experiences and perspectives (Faulkner & Coates, 2011), as it creates a safe space for participants to talk about vulnerable and sensitive subjects (Ringrose et al., 2022). Research has demonstrated the value of incorporating and empowering young people to be involved in the reduction of VAWG, by using their voices to understand what could help (Banyard et al., 2022; Basile et al., 2016). It was hoped that the study findings would have valuable practical implications based on participants' views of what could make school environments safe for girls in the UK. Subsequently, this study aimed to invite female-identifying pupils to contribute to the process of change through exploring their views on what they feel would make schools safe places for girls, with the following research question: How do secondary school pupils, who identify as female, describe a safe and unsafe school?

## Methods

### *Ethical approval*

The present study gained ethical approval through the University of Southampton's School of Psychology Ethics Committee (ID: 70133).

### *Participants*

In this study, any pupil who identified as female could express their interest to take part. Eight Year 10 pupils (aged 14-15) participated. Year 10 pupils were chosen as the study was conducted close to the COVID-19 pandemic and Year 10 pupils were deemed to be familiar enough with the school environment, whilst also being mindful of excluding Year 11 students in their final GCSE year.

The participants were recruited through a Local Authority in the South of England sending local mainstream secondary school headteachers an information leaflet explaining the aims and methods of the study and inviting them to take part. From those that expressed interest, three schools were randomly selected to take part,

through a random number generator (Haahr & Haahr, 1998). However, one school chose to withdraw consent due to challenges gaining pupil responses. Of the two remaining schools, one was a girls' secondary with a mixed 6th Form attached (School A), and one was a mixed secondary (School B).

Parental and pupil information sheets, with consent and assent forms, were sent to all Year 10 female-identifying pupils. Once consent from parents and assent from pupils had been gained, researchers selected pupils from the schools using systematic sampling. Five pupils took part from School A and three took part from School B. No further identifiable data nor characteristics were collected from the pupils.

### *Data Collection*

Approximately 60-minute-long semi-structured interviews were carried out by one researcher at a time, with another researcher present during the interviews. This ensured consistency whilst enabling an appropriate level of support; which was important given the sensitive nature of the study and need for safeguarding measures for vulnerable populations (Velardo & Elliott, 2018). All five researchers conducted and supervised at least one interview. Informed verbal consent was obtained from participants prior to commencing the interviews, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw. The interviews were audio-recorded using a university recorder. To ensure the interviews remained confidential, the interviews took place at the participants' schools in a quiet, private room. Following transcription and anonymisation of interviews using Microsoft Word, the audio files were deleted.

The topic guide (Appendix 1) was adapted from Moran's (2001) 'Drawing the Ideal Self' based on Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) (Kelly, 1950). Using PCP allowed exploration of participants' personal understanding of safe and unsafe schools for girls. Thus, constructivist epistemology was considered suitable for the study, where participants were building a concept of what a safe and unsafe school might look like.

The semi-structured interview topic guide included 6 questions such as: 'Make a quick drawing here of a classroom in your ideal safe school/unsafe school'. All questions were read

twice, first discussing a safe school, and then an unsafe school. Furthermore, an open-ended question: 'Which of the things we've discussed today do you feel are the most important for creating a safe school?' was asked at the end of the interview. The topic guide followed an iterative thematic approach where questions were adjustable based on what participants shared (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Participants were asked different prompting questions for a deeper understanding of their thoughts and experiences around safe and unsafe schools, whilst ensuring the research question was being answered (Jones et al., 2012). A pilot interview was conducted after receiving ethical approval, but no changes were made to the topic guide, and therefore this interview data was included in the analysis. At the end of each interview, participants were given an opportunity to provide any additional information they wished to share, and this aligned with the semi-structured nature of the interviews.

### *Data Analysis*

An inductive approach was used to follow Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive thematic analysis procedure which enabled data-driven analysis (Thomas, 2006). The data were coded iteratively using NVivo V.11 software (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019).

The drawings acted as a supportive aid for the discussions that took place within the interview and were summarised verbally during the interviews, enabling them to be transcribed. This allowed the codes and themes to be derived purely from the transcripts, in the knowledge that everything the participant produced was included.

Phase one of the reflexive thematic analysis procedure involved the five researchers familiarising themselves with a set of transcripts, by reading and re-reading. Continual engagement with meaning-making of the dataset allowed a greater flexibility when defining and refining codes and themes throughout the data-analysis process (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). This led to phase two: the creation of initial codes from each of the researchers' transcripts, which were obtained through analysis of meaning-units. The researchers then came together as a

group and repeated phase two, comparing codes between all transcripts and working together to discuss and reflect on assumptions and ideas in order to develop the codes.

Phase three began with researchers searching for similar codes, which could be grouped together to form initial themes. Four themes were collaboratively formed reviewed and checked for heterogeneity in phase four. This ensured that all themes were unique from each other, whilst being related to the research question. The themes were defined and named within phase five as follows: (1) 'Schools aren't talking about it (violence) even though they should be', (2) They're watching me, (3) Relationships are key and, (4) Schools have a responsibility to intervene. These themes were explored and analysed using a constructivist approach in phase six. Participants were able to bring personal values and their own constructs into the study, creating a collaborative approach to answering the research question (Andrew et al., 2019).

### *Reflexivity*

It is important to acknowledge that all five researchers were female-identifying and held their own views and experiences in relation to VAWG. Additionally, all five researchers had worked in education for several years and thus had developed their own views regarding safety for girls in school. Subsequently, the researchers were aware that their understanding of the data will have been constructed through their interactions with the participants, each other, and their individual interpretations of the meaning construed in the interviews. Having multiple people involved in the analysis enabled a richer interpretation and understanding of the data. This was aided by the use of memos, reflective discussions and questioning as a research group, which increased awareness at every stage of the research of personal biases and how and why the conclusions were drawn.

### **Results**

#### *Theme 1 "Schools aren't talking about it (violence) even though they should be"*

It was clear from the interviews that many of the

participants had experienced inappropriate and unwanted sexualized behaviours and comments, either first- or second-hand, and that these behaviours often went unseen and unaddressed in their schools. The participants emphasized that these experiences contributed to an unsafe environment for girls in schools, yet they discussed them as if they were a commonplace aspect of their daily school life.

*P8: the boys can touch the girls under the table ... especially if I get [put] at the back corner...no one can we see what they are doing.*

The sexual assault of these girls in school appears to have become so normalized that 'some people may not even know it's happening to them' (P1). The violence and abuse described was rooted in gender-based discrimination and resulted in the girls feeling inherently disadvantaged because they are female:

*P2: as a young girl it's um, you aren't defenceless but if anything happened you have, you don't have any sort of advantage on it. You just have to kind of get away as fast as you can.*

The normalisation of VAWG in schools made participants feel 'worthless', 'pathetic', 'irrelevant' and like 'they don't matter'. In their eyes, a safe school is one in which violence and abuse against girls does not go unseen and unreported; it is a place where they are listened to and taken seriously. Yet, in their eyes 'schools aren't talking about it, even though they should be' (P1).

### *Theme 2: They're 'watching me'*

The participants spoke about experiences of unwanted interactions with strangers outside the school environment. P3 reported that she was made to 'feel uncomfortable when [she] walked by' male members of public outside the school which had a negative effect on her sense of safety. This was corroborated by P4 who explained that strangers 'would be around, very close to the school. And watching me, making me very paranoid and feel unsafe'. Sometimes, this

behaviour led to further harassment:

*P2: Being catcalled first thing in the morning is not what you want. It was just outside of school, so I feel like staff could monitor that.*

Many of these negative interactions portrayed by the participants happened during the school journey, with P7 reported that she feels 'very scared' when she has to get public transport into school, due to knowing 'lots of people that have been harassed and groped on public transport'. Yet this sense of being watched was not always seen negatively; participants reflected on the importance of monitoring:

*P6: I guess like on the walk home there like it should be more cameras where people actually check where like if someone shows signs of being wrong by making someone feel uncomfortable, then they should obviously be picked up on it and like get taught that it's just like not right.*

Participants also reflected on how trusted adults watching could increase feelings of safety at school in busier environments as it allowed participants to feel that unwanted behaviours would be seen; 'it makes you feel safe and that they're looking out for you' (P2).

*P1: it's definitely where there's supervision somewhere near to there in case anything happens, just to make sure everything is ok, not necessarily looking out for misbehaviour but just in case anything that does happen, y'know, can be attended to...*

Yet the monitoring aspect was also complex as some participants felt that monitoring from school staff could also detract from the creation of a safe space, with P3 feeling that 'they (teachers) like cage you a lot' and P5 commenting that teachers could be 'pestering'. What participants seemed to be reflecting was the need for a balance between over-involvement, which felt invasive, and the right level of monitoring such that participants felt 'not watched but monitored' and 'safe that nothing's going to happen' (P2).

### *Theme 3: Relationships are key*

Pupils felt that relationships with staff members and peers were crucial in creating a safe school. A trusting relationship with a key adult meant pupils felt listened to and validated, especially if making a disclosure. The importance of being able to trust peers to support each other and report inappropriate behavior was emphasized as vital for establishing a safe school environment. As one participant expressed, feeling safe is associated with positive interactions, such as when peers look at you, smile at you, and create a sense of security. On the other hand, negative peer relationships, such as someone talking behind your back, can make a school feel unsafe, as it raises concerns about what else may have occurred without your knowledge.

Emotional support from staff was seen as a positive factor that facilitated feelings of safety:

*P5: ...I like having that close relationship with someone in the school that's close to my age, that would like sort those kinds of problems out between you know, like someone a bit older than me. (Pupil refers to an ideal, trusted adult at their ideal school).*

Support from key, trusted adults can provide a sense of security for pupils; it allows pupils to explore feelings and problem solve. Such positive relationships can foster a sense of belonging, contributing to a sense of safety, as P2 highlighted, 'belonging is very key and especially staff who make you feel like that because it's not down to just the pupils'. Conversely, where negative teacher-pupil relationships exists, sense of belonging may be compromised:

*P2: Head of years should um, yeah, know each student because if they don't know you or anything, I feel like you feel outcasted in the school and like you don't feel like you belong there.*

Some participants reported negative experiences with teachers, which impacted upon feelings of safety, with shouting and displays of teacher anger highlighted as particularly impactful:

*P2: If anyone's yelling at me I'm the kind of person to just kind of cry and I don't want that especially from teachers, I want them to make me feel like they're there for me, not for me to be afraid of them.*

A relational approach is therefore crucial; one that engenders a sense of belonging and safety, rather than triggering unsafe feelings.

### *Theme 4: Schools have a responsibility to intervene*

Participants felt that their schools should take responsibility for proactive and reactive responses to sexual harassment and abuse; they felt the school had a responsibility to keep them safe and they particularly listed 'picking up on the catcalling and actually doing something about it instead of like letting it slide in and get away with it [and] thinking it's OK' (P6).

One pupil spoke about the impact of receiving an after-school detention and therefore having to leave the school in the dark to travel home alone. This increased the feeling of vulnerability and unsafety, suggesting that schools have a responsibility not only to intervene but also to avoid creating additional challenges.

The pupils wanted more explicit teaching about healthy relationships and keeping safe. Currently, participants felt that there was 'Nothing on the subject to do with sexual assault and what to do about it and how to deal with it. Some people may not even know it's happening to them. That is very important to stop that kind of violence for girls especially.' (P2)

According to the pupils interviewed, there was a perceived lack of consistent adherence to school policies by staff, which made them feel unsafe. As one participant expressed, schools need policies and procedures and their feelings about lack of safety came directly from concerns about staff members *not* knowing the appropriate procedures and how to implement them.

*P2: I would just feel unsafe that they didn't know the procedure and how to follow that because if they don't know that how am I supposed to have a safe school?*

## Discussion

This project aimed to use PCP to explore female-identifying, secondary school pupils' conceptualisations of what would make a school safe for girls. The interviews revealed that unwanted and inappropriate sexualised behaviours and peer-on-peer conflict had been experienced or witnessed by many of the participants. This is in line with what recent literature has shown (Ofsted, 2021; Girlguiding UK, 2021; DfE, 2018). Participants described these experiences as contributing to an unsafe school environment but also as something that has become normalised, both in school and on their journeys to and from school, with the suggestion that some girls may not even be aware that these behaviours are unacceptable. This is likely reflective of the normalisation of VAWG in society and the media (DeKeseredy, 2017; Massanari, 2015). Participant experiences of inappropriate sexualised behaviours and conflict are impacting upon their emotional wellbeing, making them feel 'worthless', 'sick', and 'pathetic'. It is clear that more needs to be done to protect them from their peers in school but also from members of the public on their school journeys. These insights can support the ongoing conversation around VAWG within educational settings, and hopefully contribute to the systemic change that needs to occur. Lester and Cross (2015) found that maintaining a feeling of safety within schools is crucial for the positive wellbeing of pupils. Threats to safety can have a detrimental effect on social, emotional and academic development (Maslow, 1943), and increase the likelihood of mental health difficulties (Mori et al., 2021).

Participants in the current study expressed that violence extends beyond the school gates, which corroborates survey results highlighting that girls are afraid to leave their houses alone (Girlguiding UK, 2021). Local Authorities have a duty to provide transport where necessary to allow for access to school with reasonable safety (Education Act, 1996). Whilst this refers to the distance with which it is deemed safe for a child to walk to school without the provision of transport, the experiences of the participants in this study suggest it should extend to other elements of safety on the school journey. Schools

are legally responsible for keeping children safe in education (DfE, 2022) and it was clear from the interviews that the participants also felt that this responsibility should lie with schools. Participants also felt that this responsibility extended beyond the physical, as they described better relationships and gender education as being key to the development of safer schools.

Participants shared that RSHE failed to provide education on pivotal subjects such as gender stereotypes and lacked crucial acknowledgement that VAWG is happening in schools. This may be linked with the long-standing normalisation of VAWG perpetuated by gender inequitable views (e.g., UN, 1993), which remain commonplace in today's society (DeKeseredy, 2017). The comments elicited in the present study reflect that views related to gender inequality are held by both males and females in the school environment and this impacts upon feelings of safety. Participants in the present study felt at an inherent disadvantage in regard to safety due to their gender. This is an unsurprising finding given the disproportionate level of violence committed against women (ONS, 2018) and the prevalent message delivered online and offline that VAWG is deemed acceptable (DeKeseredy, 2017). These findings highlight the need for more work to address the harmful gender stereotypes and perspectives that contribute to the creation of an unsafe school environment. All participants felt that education plays a crucial role in addressing these concerns and providing challenge. Whilst the UK RSHE curriculum identifies gender equality as a key topic and encourages staff to be 'alive to issues such as everyday sexism, misogyny, homophobia and gender stereotypes' (RSHE; DfE, 2019, p.14), more training is needed for the staff delivering it (Ofsted, 2021). Toolkits that provide clear lesson plans to guide schools in addressing and challenging harmful gender views, such as the Expect Respect Toolkit (Abdullatif, 2021), could potentially address the gap in the current education system, though efficacy data for this is not currently available. Educators and policy makers should also advocate for the RSHE curriculum to respond to the views of young people as well as ensure that RSHE is prioritised within schools.

Normalisation of harmful gender-based

views and subsequently VAWG can also come from not discussing incidents of violence and sexual harassment. When females feel unsafe to report instances, it is likely that violent behaviours will continue. This is pertinent for the present study given that participants spoke about unsafe schools having staff who were unwelcoming, unresponsive and would not validate or listen to problems. In contrast, positive relationships with peers and teachers, and emotional support from teachers, were identified as important factors within participants' ideal safe schools. This is supported by the literature that suggests that pupil-teacher relationships are paramount for maintaining positive wellbeing and supporting both emotional and cognitive development (Murray-Harvey, 2010). In addition, it is recognised that building trusting relationships is an effective method for reducing the barriers to disclosures (Safe Lives, 2019), therefore focussing on this in schools could begin to address this issue of normalisation. Encouraging pupils to report and stop incidents will not happen without teaching and modelling pro-social behaviour that promotes respect and equality (Powell, 2011). Staff in schools can act as role models for pupils (Marengo et al., 2018), whereby facilitating positive peer interactions and using proactive strategies can reduce and prevent peer-on-peer violence.

Previous research shows that a substantial factor in reducing VAWG in educational settings is the ethos and culture of a school (Barnes et al., 2012). A school that prioritises a relational approach can increase a sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2018; Gowing, 2019) which participants in the present study, as well as in previous studies (Williams et al. 2018; Akiba, 2010), associated with safety in school. Belongingness can reduce adolescent bullying behaviours in school (Goldweber et al., 2013). However, it has been suggested that schools currently lack the relevant information regarding initiatives to increase belongingness (Allen et al., 2021).

A key strength of this research was that it took into consideration the importance of listening to and valuing the voices of girls regarding matters that directly affect them. The use of PCP provided a safe structure which supported and

empowered participants to share their views on safety in schools, whilst engaging them in solution-focused thinking around what schools could do better and could be a potential consideration for researchers when exploring sensitive topics with young people. Moreover, this study carries significant implications for schools and policymakers, as it not only underscores the areas that require attention and change but also emphasises that these recommendations for creating safer schools have been directly identified by girls themselves. However, it is important to note that some of the views expressed by participants differed, for example the high levels of monitoring in schools were associated with both feelings of safety and a lack of safety by different participants. It is also possible that the views of participants attending the girls' school may have differed from those attending the mixed school. Therefore, it may be beneficial for future research to take into consideration the type of school participants are attending. Moreover, it will be important for schools to create a platform in which their own pupils feel safe to share their views.

Whilst it was a strength of the current study that it allowed girls to express their views on safety in schools, there is increasing awareness that males must play a key role in eliminating VAWG (Flood, 2015; Berkowitz, 2004) and their involvement in research surrounding this topic is key. Ellsburg et al. (2015) state that when males and females both increase their knowledge and understanding of healthy relationships, violence is decreased. This was beyond the scope of the current study, however, future research into VAWG in schools would benefit from seeking the views of boys, as well as those who experience gender and sexual diversity. Whilst the PCP tool did elicit discussion, its focus on the more physical aspects of school meant that participants did not speak about online issues. Such issues are recognised as a prevalent extension of young people's VAWG experiences (Ofsted, 2021) therefore considering these in future research is of paramount importance.

Aligned with the Ofsted report (2021), the current study highlights the prevalence of VAWG in schools and the importance of all schools in the UK actively engaging in reducing VAWG. This includes making schools safer for girls by



improving RSHE, improved staff training, increased relational approaches and listening to pupil voice. Safeguarding is everyone's responsibility and therefore this study calls upon policymakers to 'stop that kind of violence, for girls especially.'

### Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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## Appendix 1 – The Ideal Safe School - Topic Guide

“We want to learn about the best ways to keep girls safe in schools and we want to hear from you what your ideas about this are. We’re going to be asking you to think about what your ideal safe school would be. We’re going to go through a number of topics related to this ideal school and we’re going to ask you to decide what makes this aspect of the school an ideal safe school. We want you to first draw that aspect of the school and then write down some key things about what you’ve drawn.”

### Reminders:

- There is no right or wrong way to do this
  - It doesn't matter what your drawings look like
1. Outside of your ideal safe school – “Make a quick drawing of the outside of your ideal safe school”

### Discussion Points:

- What does it look like?
- How do you get in?
- What people are around?

*Talk through drawing and note down the key things that make the outside of the school safe*

2. Your classroom – “Make a quick drawing here of a classroom in your ideal safe school”

### Discussion Points:

- Who is in the classroom?
- What do the people in the classroom do to make the classroom feel safe?

*Talk through the drawing and note down the key things that make the classroom safe*

3. The ‘playground’ – “Make a quick drawing here of where you spend breaktime at your ideal safe school”

*Discussion Points:*

- What are people doing during break time?
- Who is around?
- What are people doing to make it a safe space?

*Talk through the drawing and note down the key things that make the playground safe*

4. The adults – “Make a quick drawing here of the adults at your ideal safe school”

*Discussion Points:*

- Who is there?
- What are they doing?
- What do they say?

*Talk through the drawing and note down the key things about the teachers and helpers that makes the school safe*

5. The other students - “Make a quick drawing here of the other students at your ideal safe school”

*Discussion Points:*

- Who is there?
- What are they doing?

- What do they say?

*Talk through the drawing and note down the key things about the other students that makes the school safe*

6. Me – “Make a quick drawing here of you at your ideal safe school”

*Discussion Points:*

- What are you doing?
- What are you saying?
- How do you know that you are safe?
- How will others around you know that you’re safe?

*Talk through the drawing and note down the key things about them that makes the school safe*

*Repeat this for an unsafe school*

*Questions:*

- Which of the things we’ve discussed today do you feel are the most important for creating a safe school? These could be things your actual school is already doing or things you think could be improved.