

Everyday Sexism Project Briefing for University APPG Meeting: Stamping out Sexual Harassment and 'Lad Culture' in the University Sector

Background info: Everyday Sexism Project

- Launched in April 2012
- Collects testimonies of gender inequality of all kinds
- Over 100,000 testimonies collected to date including thousands from university students and academics
- Talks, workshops and seminars carried out at universities around the country, including: Bath, Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Cardiff, De Montfort, Durham, Exeter, Goldsmiths, Kent, KCL, Liverpool, Loughborough, LSE, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Oxford, Reading, Sheffield, Swansea, Stirling, SOAS, Westminster, York – more feedback and experiences drawn from these sessions

Overview of Findings

- The problem is complex and encompasses: sexism, sexual harassment, sexual assault, rape
- It is not confined to any particular area (such as nights out or football teams), and can affect students across campus, including in residential halls, lecture theatres and spaces like canteens and student unions
- Perpetrators include supervisors, professors, lecturers and university staff, as well as members of the public (in cases of sexual harassment in public spaces whilst at university) but are most often fellow students
- Particular occasions like Freshers week, initiations, drinking swaps, bops/events, club nights can provide opportunities for harassment. When these are university-organised or affiliated events, it gives the impression that the discrimination is institutional and makes female students feel even less able to complain.
- Social media can exacerbate the problem (Facebook 'spotted' pages, 'confessions of a uni student', LadBible, Uni Lad, the Tab).
- Many victims of harassment and assault experience victim-blaming, often from close friendship groups
- The vast majority feel unable to report their experiences to anybody, including police or university staff. Many are unaware of their rights or of how to report if they wanted to. Many are unaware of any support system in place to help them.
- Sexual harassment/assault is often normalised – it's just 'boys being boys' or 'the way things are'
- While these experiences are very widespread, and should be seen as a worrying pattern, this is not, of course, to vilify male students in general – perpetrators are a small but very vocal minority, and we see increasing numbers of male students who are keen to be part of the solution and challenge these attitudes. Support from universities could help to encourage and facilitate this. Male students who stand up currently often face backlash and homophobia themselves.
- Female academics also report a wide range of experiences of sexual harassment and discrimination within university settings. There is a marked fear of speaking out due to the precarious careers of many academics – women are afraid of being blackballed, labelled a troublemaker or punished for speaking out.
- Perpetrators are sometimes in a position of power over both student and academic victims

- Many student unions are doing excellent work with good practice in areas such as zero tolerance to sexual assault at student events. However, this is patchy, and often student initiatives struggle to find the support and buy-in they need from university administration.
- There is often a frustration and feeling that universities would rather sweep problems under the carpet than risk their reputation by tackling a problem openly
- Students who do try to protest/campaign/complain often face backlash, from fellow students and sometimes from universities

Not Isolated Incidents and not confined to any one institution

In the past few years alone:

- Imperial *Felix* newspaper publishes 'joke' recipe for Rohypnol (date rape drug) to 'get laid on Valentine's for cheaper than the price of a hooker'
- Stirling University 'lads' caught on video posted to YouTube chanting about miscarriage/sexual assault on public bus
- Aberystwyth University cricket team wearing 'casual rape' t-shirts
- Durham University rugby club 'it's not rape if' chant
- Cardiff Metropolitan University Freshers' week poster with picture of T Shirt bearing slogan: 'Last night I was raping a woman and she cried'
- LSE Rugby sexist and homophobic leaflets handed out at freshers' fair
- Emmanuel College Cambridge email to male students about spiking female students' drinks
- University of Nottingham freshers made to sing necrophilia chant
- Leeds club night 'Freshers Violation' promoted to students with video in which male student asked 'how are you going to violate a fresher tonight' – he replies 'she's going to get raped'

Everyday Sexism Project Examples:

Examples of university/college/SU themed events

- Rappers and Slappers
- CEOs and corporate hoes
- Sluts and Geeks
- Pimps and hoes
- Golf pros and tennis hoes
- Slag and drag
- Tarts and Vicars

Reports of initiation activities

- Giving lap dances
- Lining up in a club and stripping
- Suck chocolate off a kitkat between a guy's legs
- Deep throat a hotdog
- Downing bottle of beer held in a man's crotch
- 'Sex position' competitions

Freshers' week

-We had an event as part of Freshers' Week where some of our friends went on stage. A long line of girls were lined up and they had to take all their clothes off – they were told to race to strip. Then there were competitions where you had to do various sex positions. They make it all out as a great thing but you get pushed into it and it's not a matter of choice.

Social Pressure

-One of the initiations into a social club within the first month of uni was to down a bottle of beer that a man was holding between his crotch. I didn't even realise what they were going to do as we were facing the other way when they shouted 'Down it bitch'. It was awful, but I felt like such a wet blanket with everyone cheering on...

Impact

-One of the Freshers' events organised by our halls of residence was a 'girls and guys' pub crawl. We were split in to one group of 'girls' and one of 'guys' and each group went off on different pub crawl routes. All the girls were encouraged to wear pink and dress 'slutty'. We also had to come up with a 'slut name' which the older students encouraged us to write across our breasts. Upon arriving at each bar, one of the older students would shout out a word which was code for us to flash either our 'tits' or our 'arse' or dance in a seductive way in front of men in the pub. I didn't take part in this (or adopt a 'slut name') and was told that I was being too 'uptight' and not 'getting into the spirit of Freshers' Week'. The whole thing culminated in the 'girls and guys' meeting up in the student union, where we were informed that the older students had organised a competition with prizes. One prize was for the 'slut' who collected the most ties from the guys and one for the 'lad' who collected the most bras from the 'sluts'. I walked out on a scene of groups of drunk male students forcefully taking off the female students' bras.

On another occasion, I went out for the Freshers' night out of one of the women's sports clubs. Our group bumped in to the men's rugby club in a bar. They were putting their freshers through their 'initiation ceremony'. All the rugby freshers had their trousers around their ankles and were standing in their boxers. They were encouraged to pick one of us to 'grind' with them (i.e. gyrate against them). One guy grabbed me and pulled me on to the dance floor and then told me I had to grind on him or else he'd have to do a forfeit. When I refused he told me I was frigid and grabbed a different fresher.

These two incidents made me feel extremely uncomfortable and alienated me from my fellow students [...] I couldn't believe I had come up against this kind of sexism in a university campus and it left me very disillusioned with higher education. These two 'fun events' ruined my Freshers' Week and left me feeling isolated and humiliated. I dropped out after two months.

Widespread competitions/games structured around sleeping with female freshers

-At my uni fresher's week, the 'crew' (designed to help new students) got points for scoring with freshers, especially virgins.

-The boys who worked behind the Student Union bar used to play 'fuck a fresher' at freshers week. There was a points scoring system [...] bonus points if you brought the girl's knickers in, took her virginity

Sexism from teachers/supervisors/lecturers

- At uni we were told during one tutorial that the men in the room were more likely to become managers because they were male, this was a social work degree course...
- I was only girl in politics tutorial on feminism. No real discussion. Just jokes on women & kitchen. Including from the tutor.
- At a university tutorial an (otherwise lovely) older male tutor expressed surprise that I knew what a cable tie was - and asked if I had brothers who had told me. This is such a shame as after this casual sexism I can't respect him as a tutor as much now
- After approaching my tutor at university for help on an essay he had set (ironically) on 'Misogyny in Paradise Lost', he told me that I should be happy with a 2:1 because women couldn't get firsts as they weren't able to 'think outside of the box' like men. For every essay I wrote he gave me one mark off a first. He also told me 'not to go running to the department to complain' as 'girls' before me had.

Unwanted advances/touching/sexual assault from supervisors/professors/lecturers

- Senior lecturer and tutor wrapping his arm around my waist every time I went to speak to him and slapping the inside of my thigh to make a point.
- When I was a PhD student my supervisor had a bad reputation for being lecherous. He asked one of the women who worked in the office what her chest size was so he could buy her a jumper as a present. When I finished my thesis and had submitted he closed the door to his office and tried to kiss me when we were alone. I've also found out since he did this to a friend of mine as well. He shouldn't have a job in a reputable university.
- I have to wear high necklines or scarves to specific seminars in order to avoid a certain male lecturer staring down my top. As I feel uncomfortable being on my own with him, I do not ask him for help with work outside of lessons.
- At university my new lecturer asked me sexual questions and made a lot of sexual comments [...] it meant I didn't feel able to wait behind after class and ask him anything.
- Had an IT lecturer who would always sit very close on the bench to point out things you did wrong in your program (with 'casual' touches, etc.). I declined his invitation to an advanced programming group simply because I knew it was him leading that group. My friend joined it and was constantly groped but she suffered in silence because she wanted to excel at programming.

Lack of Support when reporting

- Last year, I was sexually harassed by one of my lecturers. He would routinely invade my personal space, tell me to rub my breasts against him, grab me, stare openly at my legs and breasts, and talk about sexually explicit topics in class instead of what was on the syllabus. One day after class, he asked me intrusive questions about my sex life to the point where he became visibly aroused. Finally, I told him to back off and he lost his temper with me.
- I wound up filing a formal complaint after he started throwing away my work instead of returning it. I was told by members of staff that sexual harassment is something that happens to women in academia and that I simply needed to learn to put up with it. I was shunned by staff and students alike for being a troublemaker.

A year on, I'm still dealing with the fallout from the sexual harassment case. I am getting absolutely no support from the university -- quite the opposite, in fact. It may sound naive, but I was shocked that, in 2012, female students at a world-class research university are still treated as second-class citizens and unwanted interlopers in a world created by and for men.

Sexism faced by women in academia

-I am fed up of being looked at lasciviously when I enter some seminar/conference/event of any academic kind with my male colleagues (me being the only woman around, which is the most of the times the case). There's always a jackass around who will never understand I'm there to work.

Sexism/harassment of female students in a wide variety of settings

-Debate at Glasgow University, female student speaking, lad in gallery – 'nice knockers'.

-Just got called a slag by two guys sitting outside the University of York library.

-I'm sick of walking home from Uni at 6pm and getting harassed every time; from people shouting things or making fellatio gestures out of their cars because they think they're 'funny' or that I should be 'flattered', or the people in the street who make kissing noises when I walk past, or shout 'slut' or 'get your tits out' at me. Flattering? How is that flattering? I'm on the verge of tears every time I get home.

Sexual advances/assault from fellow students

-Another student at college outright told me I was having sex with him that night. I refused and told him that I'm still a virgin and want to find the right guy, and he was calling me a slag, a slut, a whore, for refusing to sleep with him and wanting to keep my virginity.

I thought that was the end of it until a few days later in a club, when he just appeared, straddled himself across my legs and started pinning me against the seat forcing kisses on me, and putting his hand down my underwear trying to finger me, and said, 'Now I've got you.' My friends came over when they saw and he quickly fled.

Female students' ability questioned

-On first day at University, ancient don asked whether I had had to 'bend over' to get in.

Normalisation of sexual harassment/assault

-Told that being groped/touched/having a crotch rubbed against you unwantedly is 'a normal part of university nightlife'.

-Having my arse groped? During nights out it's pretty much guaranteed

- It's not a common experience, it's an inevitable one. I don't know any girl at university who hasn't been touched or groped without their consent. I also don't know any girl at university who would consider it assault or report it.

-When I go to a club, no matter if I wear something modest, or something that society deems 'slutty', I will get grabbed by someone, who thinks by doing so, I'll find them attractive, or I should take it as a compliment. I'm left feeling violated, and as if it's my fault. Why is it my fault? Because I'm a woman? Because I'm in a dress? Because I should be expecting it?

Particular issues in male-dominated subjects

-Sent an email by the Physics society: "Freshers' Lunch [...] This will be mainly a chance for you to scope out who's in your department and stake your claim early on the 1 in 5 girls."

- I was in a lecture last week – IT systems. The lecturer put up a slide of 5 or so talking heads - people like Mark Zuckerberg and the founder of Google – and discussed their net worth. Then he pointed to the last picture – a blonde, attractive woman. He said: 'I put this one up especially for the girls. Anyone know who she is? [Silence]. Well this is the late Steve Jobs' wife – worth X billion dollars by virtue of the man she married. So girls, stick to the IT guys – you never know, you might strike it rich.'

- I went to a talk at my University by an esteemed male professor who was giving advice on how to be a scientist. He said that if we want to succeed in academia as a scientist we needed 'male traits', those being competitiveness, confidence and impatience. Also mentioned that having children may be problematic career wise for women unless we had very understanding husbands. One female academic challenged him afterwards at question time and got dismissed. Left feeling very sad indeed.

Victim Blaming

-I was 19 and went on a school trip out of town. We all had some drinks and I accidentally locked myself out of my hotel room, and knocked on the trip leader's room to get help. I trusted him. He asked me in and, after I had thrown up everywhere, invited me to sleep in his bed with him. I passed out and woke up to him licking my vagina. I was confused and afraid. In the morning I realized he had raped me while I was unconscious; I was covered in bruises and my vagina and anus hurt.

I told the university and several members of staff blamed me for drinking. The rapist told my friends I was a slut and wanted it. No one believed me, and people thought I was trying to get attention.

That was three years ago and I still haven't reported it to the police.

-I was raped in my second year of university. I had some great support from my family, and some great therapy. I thought this was the worst part, but when I felt safe enough to tell my friends, the questions started. 'Was I drunk?' 'Was I dressed sluttily?' 'Did I know him?' 'Had I led him on?' It broke my heart.