

Researchers: An overhaul of sex education is needed to combat sexual and gender-based violence in schools across England

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Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in schools across England is

not merely a series of isolated incidents but a deeply rooted systemic issue. This growing problem within school and online environments demands immediate and transformative solutions, according to researchers from the University of Surrey, UCL and Bedfordshire.

In a new [paper](#) published in *Gender and Education*, researchers argue for a radical shift in addressing SGBV through the concept of post-digital sexual [citizenship](#). This approach contrasts sharply with the previous U.K. government's "nudge" philosophy, which subtly encourages changes in behavior without direct intervention.

Post-digital sexual citizenship extends the principles of sexual citizenship into the digital age. It acknowledges the pervasive influence of digital media and online environments on young people's sexual development and identities. This concept argues for:

- Empowerment through education: Young people should have access to comprehensive, inclusive, and accurate [sexual education](#) that addresses both offline and online contexts.
- Agency and participation: Recognizing young people as active participants in shaping their sexual identities and experiences. Post-digital sexual citizenship involves empowering youth to engage in discussions, make informed choices, and advocate for their rights in both physical and digital spaces.
- Challenging harmful norms: Addressing and challenging socio-cultural systems that perpetuate harmful sexual behaviors and attitudes. This includes combating online harassment, exploitation, and the dissemination of harmful stereotypes and misinformation.
- Safety and protection: Ensuring that young people are protected from [sexual violence](#) and exploitation in all forms, including digital spaces.

Dr. Emily Setty, lead author of the paper and Senior Lecturer in Criminology at the University of Surrey, said, "The adoption of post-digital sexual citizenship has significant implications for educational policies and practices. Inclusive curriculum in schools must reflect the realities of young people's lives, integrating digital literacy with sexual education.

"Policymakers and educators should also involve young people in the development and evaluation of sexual education programs, ensuring their voices and experiences are central."

The term "post-digital" refers to a stage where digital technology is deeply integrated into everyday life. It's a shift from seeing digital tools as novel or separate from other aspects of life to recognizing them as an essential part of society and culture.

Sexual citizenship is a concept that includes the rights, responsibilities, and recognition of individuals as sexual beings. Sexual citizenship involves access to comprehensive sexual education, protection from discrimination and violence, and the ability to participate fully in social and cultural life.

The research team meticulously analyzed national policy, identifying the limitations of existing strategies and the need for a paradigm shift. By incorporating the voices of young people and integrating their experiences and insights, the researchers believe that their approach is a more inclusive and effective approach to Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) curriculum.

Dr. Emily Setty continued, "The evidence of Sexual and Gender Based Violence in schools challenges the status quo and calls for the abandonment of top-down methods that fail to address the core issues of SGBV.

"Instead, we want advocacy for policies that recognize young people as post-digital sexual citizens, equipped with the knowledge and agency to navigate their social and online environments safely and responsibly.

"We must establish robust support systems, both online and offline, to help [young people](#) navigate challenges related to their sexual development and digital interactions."

While the focus is on England, the implications of this study resonate globally. Countries worldwide grappling with SGBV in schools can benefit from adopting a similar framework that prioritizes youth participation and empowerment.

More information: Emily Setty et al, From 'harmful sexual behaviour' to 'harmful sexual culture': addressing school-related sexual and gender-based violence among young people in England through 'post-digital sexual citizenship', *Gender and Education* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/09540253.2024.2348534](#)

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