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LEADING ARTICLE

JANUARY 21 2017, 12:01AM, THE TIMES

Sex Ed

Sexual violence is too common in Britain's universities.
Education is the answer



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“Oh, it’s just a boy being a boy.” That was what one Durham University student reportedly heard from her peers when she told them she had been raped. Hers is not an isolated case. Our reporting from Durham reveals a bleak culture of attitudes to consent at the university, which has recently garnered attention after the third student in a year was tried for rape, and cleared. His barrister bemoaned the “f*** buddy culture” in British universities. In truth, it looks more like a rape culture.

The figures are startling. According to a recent report from the women and equalities committee in parliament, more than half of women and girls aged between 13 and 21 have experienced unwanted sexual touching at school or university in the past year. Numerous students tell their stories on these pages today. One postgraduate speaks of being “touched up in my sleep” by a man in her friendship group. She woke, too terrified to move, but thereafter, she says, “his presence made me feel sick”. Other victims report long-lasting damage to their mental health. The incidence of depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress is higher among survivors of rape and sexual assault.

Perpetrators must be pursued through the justice system, but often that is not enough. Victims often refrain from reporting the crime in the first place for fear of being shamed or ostracised by their peers. One woman at Durham was told by friends that she should not report her attacker’s crime as it would “ruin his life”.

Even those that are reported often do not make it to trial. Even those that make it to trial are less likely to end in conviction than other crimes, because allegations of sexual violence are so hard to prove. Rape frequently occurs in private. Evidence is scarce. Cases can come down to one person’s word against another and, if either party was drunk, their testimony is a more problematic guide. All of that gives some clue as to why, though the national crime survey estimates that between 60,000 and 90,000 people are victims of rape every year, in 2013 there were only 1,070 convictions.

Some have suggested that this is due to women making false allegations after “changing their minds”. This is tragic when it happens. Young men’s lives can be ruined. But evidence from the Crown Prosecution Service suggests that it is rare, despite the attention it receives. Men destroyed by false allegations are easily noticed. Young women whose lives are torn apart by sexual violence are not.

That means educating people about consent, and about their use of alcohol. Too few students understand that, in law, one can lose the capacity to consent through consumption of alcohol. Too few students understand that consent can be withdrawn at any time. Too few understand that violence is still violence if it is undertaken after drink, drugs, at the urging of peers, or in the service of the mores of the “lad culture” that dominates some sports teams.

For no discernible reason, the government has repeatedly ignored calls to make sex education compulsory in schools, where this conversation should begin. Though consent workshops in universities have often been ridiculed as “political correctness gone mad”, they might not be a bad place for it to continue. These issues can be difficult to discuss, but the consequences of ignoring them are grave. It is time to start talking.



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Alan Hawkes 3 hours ago

A fine piece with only one point with which I would raise issue. Schools providing sex education fine: but have parents no role in this; in the way in which they demonstrate respect for each other onwards? Are parents relaxed at the possibility of their son being convicted of such an offence, or their daughters being a victim?

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