

Strand 2 | Relationships and Sexuality

Learning Outcome 2.8:	Students should be able to discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape, and what to do and how to seek support if they or someone they know has experienced any of these.
Pre-learning:	Before discussing this topic students need to have engaged with LO 2.4 (gender, culture and social norms) as well as LO 2.5 (signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control) and LO 2.7 (the influence of pornography on relationship expectations and behaviors). Revisiting junior cycle learning about sexual consent and sexual harassment might also be helpful (see Relationships and Sexuality 2 and 3).

What is the important learning?

Learning Outcome **2.8** addresses the issue of sexual violence which encompasses various forms of non-consensual sexual acts. The focus of learning is on the following forms of sexual violence – image based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape, all of which are serious crimes and can have devastating consequences for survivors. The goal of learning is to enable young people to recognise and ‘call out’ these as serious acts of violence, and empower them to seek support if they or someone they know has been affected by sexual violence of any kind.

It is important that this learning outcome is not taught in isolation as it builds upon important prior learning in junior cycle SPHE and in senior cycle SPHE (see above). A review of students’ learning about consent is vital.

An important part of the discussion is understanding the wider environment in which such sexual violence occurs. Societal attitudes and myths contribute to the normalisation and acceptance of particular behaviours and to blaming victims of sexual violence. Situating this learning within the continuum of sexual violence that connects all forms of sexual violence—whether subtle or overt—enables students to reflect on how everyday comments, jokes etc. contribute to a culture of normalised violence. It is also important to engage students with the gendered nature of this topic and examine why women disproportionately experience sexual violence.

As so many people are affected, either directly or indirectly, by sexual violence a further important aspect of learning is offering reassurance that help and support is available and signposting where to find this. Students also need to know their protections under the law.

Useful definitions

Image-based abuse: includes the non-consensual distribution of intimate images including the taking, distribution, publication or threatening to distribute intimate images without consent, with intent to cause harm, alarm or distress to the victim [Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020](#)

Sexual harassment: Any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal, or physical conduct of a sexual nature. It has the purpose or effect of violating a person’s dignity and creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive environment for the person. The intent of the perpetrator is irrelevant as the focus is on the impact to the victim who suffers a range of psychological, physical, and material harms as a result.

Rape: Any form of sexual intercourse or penetration without the explicit consent of the victim. Consent can be regarded as absent where the perpetrator has covertly or overtly used coercion, threat, or force or has taken advantage of the victim’s vulnerability, powerlessness, or inability to consent (e.g., due to intoxication, unconsciousness, or being underage).

Sexual assault: Any non-consensual sexual contact or behaviour, which can range from unwanted touching or groping to more severe forms of assault. It can occur in various settings, including intimate relationships, social gatherings, workplaces, and public spaces.

FACTS

- One in five (21%) women experienced non-consensual sexual intercourse at least once in their lifetime. Women experience four times the rate of non-consensual sexual intercourse (21%) than men (5%) over their lifetime.
- In general, younger women are more likely to have experienced sexual violence than older women. Three in ten (31%) women aged 25–34 experienced non-consensual sexual intercourse and five in ten (52%) women aged 18–24 experienced non-consensual sexual touching.
- Sexual harassment is an issue at all stages of life but particularly in adolescence and young adulthood. Half of young adults surveyed (50% of those aged 18–24) experienced sexual harassment in the previous 12 months, compared with 7% for those aged 65 and older.

Source: [The CSO Sexual Violence Survey, 2022](#)

Approaches to consider when teaching about sexual violence

- Review the [guidelines for creating a safe SPHE classroom](#) and [guidelines for handling sensitive discussions](#) and use these to help create a space where sensitive and sometimes upsetting issues can be safely discussed.
- Use scenarios and case-studies to foster empathy and understanding of the impact of sexual violence on survivors. Keep in mind that it is through empathy, not information, that we challenge attitudes.
- The *Sexual Violence Pyramid* is a useful visual tool that can be used to illustrate how different behaviors—ranging from seemingly minor actions to serious crimes—are all part of a spectrum that contributes to a culture where sexual violence occurs and is accepted.
- Contextualise this learning within a broader environment of gender inequality, examining the influence of gender as a cause of sexual violence and the impact of one's gender in the aftermath of sexual violence, such as in decisions whether to report and whether individuals are believed.
- Examine common myths and misconceptions about sexual violence including common myths and assumptions regarding perpetrators and victims. Use evidence-based information to challenge these.
- Discuss societal attitudes and cultural norms that contribute to victim-blaming, stigma, and silence surrounding sexual violence.
- Make links with prior learning and classroom discussion about harmful gender norms and stereotypes which, for example, portray male dominance and female submission. Link back to learning about pornography (RSE 3 and RSE 5).
- Develop skills needed for students to become allies and advocates for survivors, challenging harmful attitudes and behaviours and promoting consent, respect and equality.
- Encourage help-seeking behaviours and skills and ensure that all students know where they can access support, advice and information.
- Discuss ways to respond and support someone who has been affected by sexual violence.
- Adopt an inclusive lens, acknowledging that sexual violence happens across all genders, sexual orientations, social classes, religions and cultures. However, it is important to engage students with the power dynamics that operate in favour of men and create awareness that some individuals and groups are more vulnerable and disproportionately experience sexual violence. These vulnerable groups can also experience additional barriers when it comes to seeking support.
- See table 1.3 [Zero Tolerance, Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence](#), p.20.

Possible follow-on learning outcome:

LO 3.5: Students will be able to demonstrate the confidence and skills need to be their own person and be able to advocate for themselves and others, even if it means standing out from the crowd.

Go to the SPHE Toolkit for [classroom resources linked to LO 2.8](#)