



SHE PLAYS HE SAYS



PREVENTING SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND MISOGYNY IN GAMING



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**LET'S TALK
ABOUT GAMES**



Female gamers of all ages are receiving threats of sexual harassment and misogynistic comments at an alarming rate. A recent survey by Bryter found that

40% OF FEMALE GAMERS HAVE EXPERIENCED VERBAL ABUSE FROM MALE GAMERS WHILE PLAYING ONLINE MULTIPLAYERS, AND 28% HAVE EXPERIENCED SEXUAL HARASSMENT FROM MALE PLAYERS. WOMEN RECALL RECEIVING THREATS OR INAPPROPRIATE REQUESTS FOR SEXUAL CONTENT FROM AS YOUNG AS 12 YEARS OLD.

The Young Gamers and Gamblers Education Trust (YGAM) is a national charity with a social purpose to inform, educate, and safeguard young and vulnerable people against gaming and gambling harm. We recently organised a focus group to discuss the prevalence of sexual harassment and misogyny after one of our employees, a mother of two girls, became aware that a member of our student team had suffered harassment since she was 12 years old. She was shocked and horrified that this occurred, but after discussing the issue with more women, we realised that possible solutions were hardly few and far between.

We learned that certain behaviours and phrases used to abuse women who game were more common than others; that threats sometimes turned into action, and that female survivors of sexual assault and rape were particularly harmed by this behaviour.

Our team of two women and two men spoke to five female gamers aged between 21–54, three fathers and two academics about what they had experienced or discovered through conversations with children/research, and how the charity, the government and society could work together to prevent sexual harassment in gaming.

Following our discussion, we have devised three key recommendations:

- Inform parents of the behaviours young people could be exposed to while gaming
- ✗ Educate boys at a young age on rape culture and discrimination, and the impact these words said during online gaming can cause
- Safeguard female gamers and create a safe environment where victims of sexual harassment are supported



PREVENTING SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND MISOGYNY IN GAMING



DATA

Researchers from Bryter have conducted extensive annual surveys into the female gaming experience since 2018. Their research helped to inform our conversation, and provided some shocking revelations about the extent of misogyny and sexual harassment experienced by women, including graphic and chilling threats of rape or murder. Crucially, they highlighted that such abuse can escalate to social media and offline stalking and harassment.

Bryter will be releasing their 2021 report in May – if you would like to read a copy, please email jenny.mcbean@bryter-uk.com

Presenting these findings to our focus group, we heard accounts of very similar behaviour. In particular, we would add the following key observations about the effects of sexual harassment and misogyny on gamers, and other trends:

1. SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND MISOGYNY IN GAMING OFTEN CHANGES THE WAY THAT WOMEN PLAY.

All of the women we spoke to had changed their behaviour in some way to eliminate the possibility of contact with male players, for fear of abuse. Often, women stopped playing openly online; played online only with people they knew; playing different games that they did not enjoy as much, and/or played without a headset. Bryter's 2020 survey and another study of 271 female gamers supports the idea that this reaction is commonplace, with 31% of female gamers in the former survey not revealing their gender when playing online games, and 33% refusing to speak in online games.

"[ONCE I CHANGED MY GAMER TAG TO ONE THAT PEOPLE CAN TELL IS FEMALE] IT WAS UNBELIEVABLE THE MESSAGES I RECEIVED. YOU'LL GET A PRIVATE MESSAGE WHILE PLAYING A GAME FROM SOMEBODY IN YOUR TEAM WHILE YOU'RE IMMERSSED IN THE GAME, IT'LL SAY SOMETHING LIKE "I'M MASTURBATING". THAT'S NOT THE SPACE FOR THIS. AND THEY SAY IT AS IF IT'S MEANT TO BE A COMPLIMENT TO YOU." - LISA, 27

"THE FIRST TIME I EXPERIENCED A THREAT [ONLINE] I WAS 14 OR 15, AND IT WAS THE FIRST TIME I'D EVER OPENED THIS GAME AND FIRST TIME I'D EVER BEEN ONLINE... I DIDN'T PLAY ONLINE AGAIN FOR ANOTHER TWO YEARS." - MOLLIE, 21



SOME OF THE KEY FINDINGS FROM BRYTER'S 2020 REPORT, WHICH TARGETED 2,000 GAMERS ACROSS US & UK, AGED 16+ AND PLAY VIDEO GAMES ON PC OR CONSOLE AT LEAST MONTHLY, INCLUDE:

MOST FEMALE GAMERS EXPERIENCE REGULAR SEXIST COMMENTS, BUT THIS SOMETIMES ESCALATES TO MUCH DARKER, THREATENING BEHAVIOURS.

27%

REPORTED THAT THEY HAD BEEN EXCLUDED FROM PARTICIPATION IN GAMES BECAUSE OF THEIR GENDER.

17%

HAVE RECEIVED VERBAL ABUSE FROM MALE OR OTHER GAMERS WHILE PLAYING OFFLINE.

35%

OF WOMEN SAID THEY HAD BEEN SENT INAPPROPRIATE CONTENT OR MESSAGES FROM MALE OR OTHER GAMERS, WHILE

28%

HAD EXPERIENCED SEXUAL HARASSMENT FROM MALE OR OTHER GAMERS.

40%

OF FEMALE GAMERS HAVE EXPERIENCED VERBAL ABUSE FROM MALE GAMERS WHILE PLAYING ONLINE MULTIPLAYERS.

THE MAJORITY OF GAMERS, BOTH MALE AND FEMALE, FELT THAT THERE ARE NOT ADEQUATE PROCESSES IN PLACE TO DEAL WITH TOXIC BEHAVIOUR.



2. INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOUR IS VERY RARELY CHALLENGED BY OTHER PLAYERS - IF EVER - AND THIS IS COMPOUNDED BY ANONYMITY.

Female gamers we spoke to agreed that they have only rarely seen misogyny and harassment called out by other players in an online multiplayer game. More often than not, the behaviour is challenged by another female player. When this occurs, or the victims attempt to challenge the abuse themselves, players noted a culture of “doubling down”, where male players will either deny that they have said anything offensive, or amplify the abuse.

“YOU DON’T TEND TO NECESSARILY KNOW THE PEOPLE YOU’RE PLAYING WITH... IF THEY ABUSE YOU, IT’S VERY, VERY DIFFICULT TO REPORT THEM BECAUSE YOU DON’T REALLY KNOW WHO THEY ARE, ESPECIALLY IN A LOT OF ONLINE GAMES THAT DON’T HAVE VERY EASY TO ACCESS REPORT FUNCTIONS. PEOPLE FEEL A LOT SAFER TO ACT THAT WAY [I.E. WITHOUT FEAR OF REPERCUSSION].”

3. SOME FEMALE GAMERS HAVE SO LITTLE FAITH IN THE REPORTING AND PUNITIVE SYSTEM THAT THEY DO NOT REPORT.

Attendees of our session acknowledged that regulation of the online community faces unique challenges by comparison to many schools and workplaces, where there is such a diversity of ages, genders, ethnicities etc. that behaviours vary. Academic Matthew Barr explained:

“WHILE I THINK IT IS NOT GAMING’S PROBLEM, IT IS EXACERBATED BY THE LACK OF STRUCTURE IN GAMING. EVEN THE FACT THAT WE MIGHT BE PLAYING WITH PEOPLE IN DIFFERENT [LEGAL] JURISDICTIONS, LET ALONE [NOT HAVING] THE SAME AUTHORITY TO GO TO.”

On top of this, unlike with official pastoral structures in the education system, the structures are not always in place in games that make it immediately obvious where you can report a problem. Women were frustrated that comments could flash up on their screen in the middle of game play, but to report it they would often have to quit the game. Some described making reports that seemed to drift into the ether, never hearing back as to whether the perpetrator had faced any action.

Additionally, players and academics on the panel noted that the emphasis within gaming communities and outside support, including friends and their education setting, places the burden on coping mechanisms for women, rather than the emphasis being on men to correct their behaviour.



4. HIGHLY COMPETITIVE AND GROUP GAMES CAN BE MORE TOXIC THAN OTHER TYPES

Female gamers shared that they had experienced misogyny and sexual harassment from players with a wide range of abilities, but that highly competitive games could be more intensely toxic. Dr Sarah Hays, a professional Esports player from the USA, found this to be particularly true of highly-skilled male players, from her experience:

“THE WORST ARE ONES WHERE IT’S THE HIGH PACED COMPETITIVE LIKE OVERWATCH OR FORTNITE OR DOTA 2 OR LEAGUE OF LEGENDS.”

5. THERE IS AN ADDITIONAL IMPACT ON MARGINALISED GROUPS OF WOMEN

LBGT+ and Black gamers emphasised that toxicity often did not stop at their gender, with faceless users asking questions about sexuality and race often spurred by gamer tags and using this to abuse:

“ESPECIALLY AS A QUEER PERSON IN THAT SPACE IS EVEN MORE DIFFICULT BECAUSE YOU’VE GOT HOMOPHOBIA, COMPOUNDED ONTO THAT. AND YOU’RE BEING TREATED AS IF YOU’RE ENTERING A SPACE THAT IS NOT YOURS, YOU’RE ENTERING THE MEN’S LOCKER ROOM. BUT IT SHOULDN’T BE THAT WAY.”

- MOLLIE, 21

“WHEN A COUPLE OF RANDOMS JOINED OUR TEAM TO PLAY, THEY BEGAN ASKING WHY MY NAME WAS CHOCOKITTY, AND THEN ASKED IF I WERE BLACK - AND BEGAN MAKING COMMENTS ABOUT BLACK PEOPLE. MY CLAN MATES IMMEDIATELY BOOTED THEM FROM THE GAME AND REPORTED THEM.” - DOMINIQUE, 54





WHAT DOES THE ABUSE LOOK LIKE?

RAPE AND VIOLENT THREATS

Women in our group said that they had, or knew of friends who had, received threats of rape or threatening to rape a family member from boys as young as 10 years old. While female gamers acknowledged that these children might not know the meaning of the threat, many said that it had a severe impact on them and was an issue that could easily be improved with better education to young boys about sexual assault and victim experience.

"IT'S JUST SO NORMALISED. THERE'S JUST SO MANY RAPE THREATS SO CASUALLY THROWN IN THERE. AND AS A SURVIVOR OF RAPE MYSELF, WHEN I FIRST STARTED GOING ONLINE I FOUND THAT A BIT DIFFICULT TO DEAL WITH. ON TOP OF GENERALLY SEXIST COMMENTS, THERE'S AN EXTRA LAYER WHERE IT GETS A BIT MORE TOXIC. THERE'S GENERAL ABUSE THAT WE'VE ALL RECEIVED, LIKE, "GO KILL YOURSELF" OR REALLY AWFUL THINGS LIKE THAT." - LISA, 27

SEXUAL HARASSMENT, INCLUDING OFFERING PAYMENT FOR NUDE IMAGES

Women in the group shared a range of experiences of sexual harassment, many of which transcended threats by asking for or sending nude images and even included using the game itself to recreate acts of sexual violence. Attendees raised concerns that, in the majority of online games, you do not know the age or any other identifying factors of the people you're playing with, meaning that the men requesting such images could be grooming young girls.

"THE FIRST TIME I EXPERIENCED A THREAT [ONLINE] I WAS 14 OR 15, AND IT WAS THE FIRST TIME I'D EVER OPENED THIS GAME AND FIRST TIME I'D EVER BEEN ONLINE. I NEEDED SOMEONE TO HEAL ME, I JUST SAID, 'HEY, CAN SOMEONE HEAL ME'. [UPON HEARING MY FEMININE VOICE], MY TEAM CAME OVER SHOT ME AND BEGAN TEA-BAGGING ME, WHICH IS WHERE A CHARACTER WILL STAND OVER YOUR FACE AND CROUCH ON YOU ESSENTIALLY IMPLYING THAT THEY ARE RUBBING THEIR GENITALIA IN YOUR FACE, AND THEN THEY STARTED TO SEXUALLY HARASS ME. I WAS 15. I WAS A CHILD... I DIDN'T PLAY ONLINE AGAIN FOR ANOTHER TWO YEARS." - MOLLIE, 21

"YOU'LL BE GAMING AND CHECK THE CHAT AND SEE YOU'VE RECEIVED UNWANTED PICTURES OR MESSAGES, PURELY BECAUSE YOU'RE A WOMAN AND IT'S JUST NOT THE SPACE FOR THAT. YOU DON'T KNOW WHO THEY ARE, YOU DON'T KNOW HOW OLD THEY ARE. THEY DON'T KNOW HOW OLD YOU ARE." - LISA, 27

"IT CAN ESCALATE TO DEATH THREATS, RAPE THREATS, DOXXING THREATS, I BRIEFLY STREAMED ON TWITCH AND I THINK IN MY LIKE SECOND OR THIRD STREAM, I LITERALLY HAD LIKE TWO OR THREE PEOPLE WATCHING AND SOMEONE FAKED A DONATION. THEN, THEY [MESSAGED ME THROUGH] MY DMS [DIRECT MESSAGES] ASKING ME "SEND ME NUDES, AND I'LL SEND YOU MONEY"... IT'S A REALLY WEIRD DICHOTOMY OF EITHER YOU'RE BEING SEXUALLY HARASSED... OR IN THE SENSE THAT THEY'RE COMING FOR YOU AND VYING FOR YOUR AFFECTION" - MOLLIE, 21

BRYTER'S FEMALE GAMER SURVEYS YEAR ON YEAR FOUND THAT AN AVERAGE OF 10% OF FEMALE GAMERS RECEIVE RAPE THREATS (10% IN 2018, 14% IN 2019 AND 7% IN 2020).



DOXING

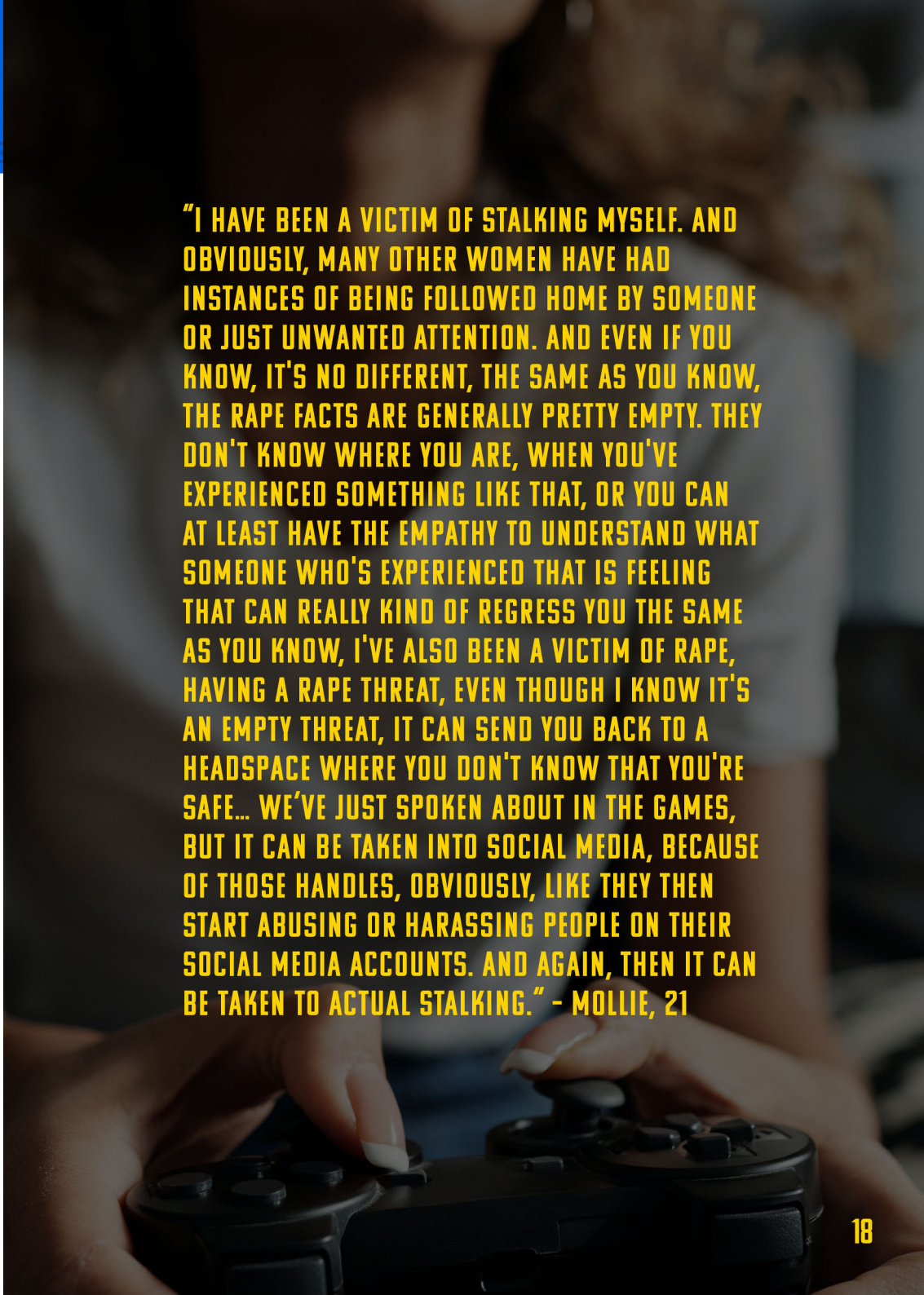
Doxing is the act of threatening to share an individual's private information without their permission. While some attendees said that they felt that doxing constituted a "generally very empty threat" due to the anonymity afforded to both parties playing a game, the effect of the threat can be very real to the victim.

MISOGYNISTIC COMMENTS

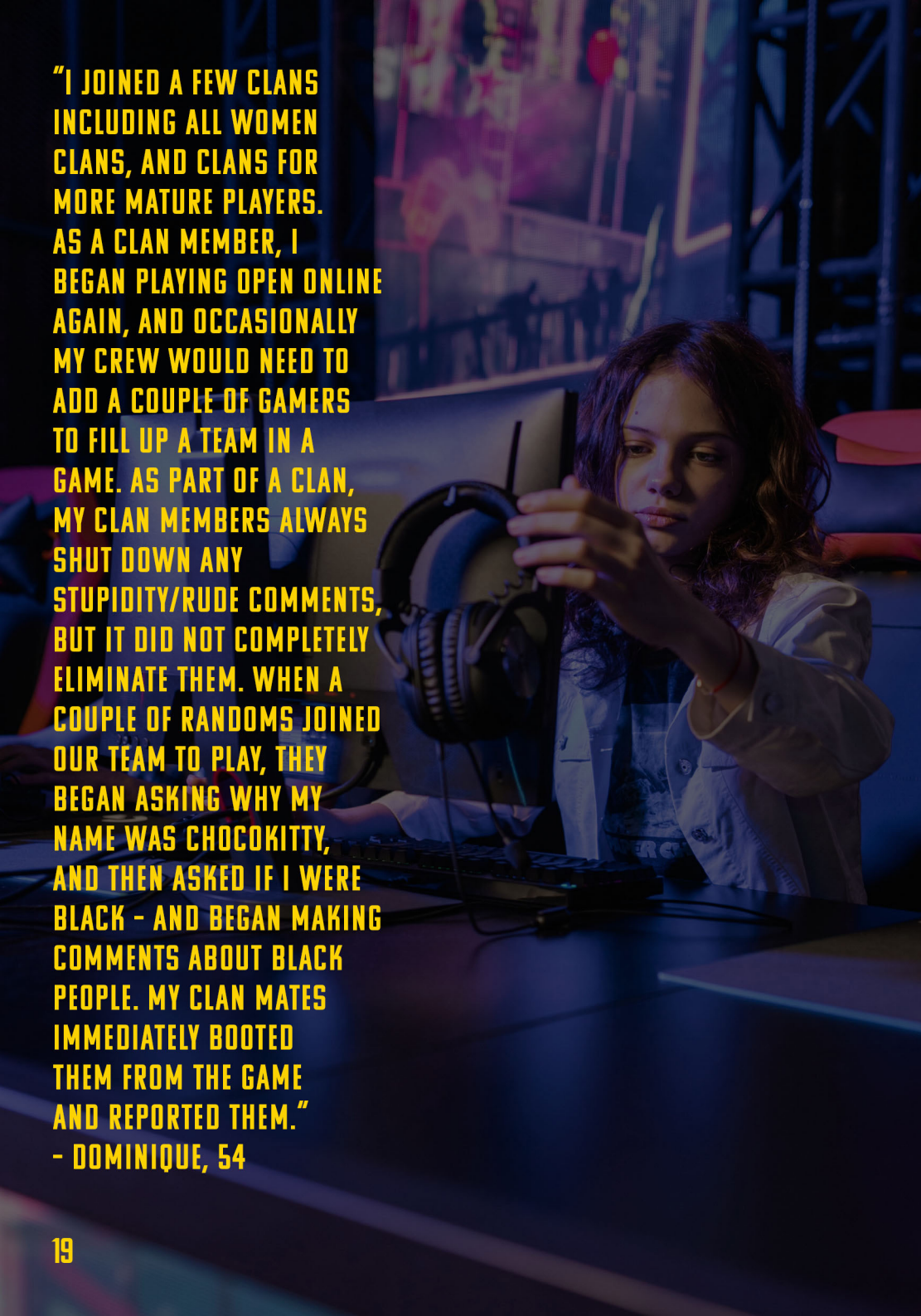
Women of all ages that we spoke to had received misogynistic comments that reflected many typical prejudicial sentiments relating to a woman's place in society. This most prevalently took the form that gaming is not the place for a woman as it's a male activity, and women reported often feeling left out or being pushed out of games.

**"IF YOU'RE A WOMAN, AND YOU'RE NOT VERY GOOD AT A GAME, IT'S
"YOU'RE A BITCH, GO MAKE ME A SANDWICH. WHY ARE YOU GAMING?
YOU SHOULDN'T EVEN GAME" AND IT'S JUST LIKE, YOU CAN'T EXIST AS A
WOMAN IN THE SPACE AT ALL BEING GOOD OR BAD, BECAUSE EITHER
WAY, YOU'RE OFFENDING SOMEONE, THAT OR THEY NEED TO SINK FOR
YOU. IT'S GOTTEN SO BAD." - MOLLIE, 21**

**"OFTEN IT STARTS WITH GENERALLY SEXIST COMMENTS, LIKE TELLING
YOU TO BE QUIET WHEN YOU'RE TALKING, OR "SHOULDN'T YOU BE
MAKING SANDWICHES?" IF YOU BEAT SOMEBODY, THINGS THAT SOME
PEOPLE ASSUME IS REALLY FUNNY. BUT ACTUALLY, THEY'RE VERY
DAMAGING." - LISA, 27**



**"I HAVE BEEN A VICTIM OF STALKING MYSELF. AND
OBVIOUSLY, MANY OTHER WOMEN HAVE HAD
INSTANCES OF BEING FOLLOWED HOME BY SOMEONE
OR JUST UNWANTED ATTENTION. AND EVEN IF YOU
KNOW, IT'S NO DIFFERENT, THE SAME AS YOU KNOW,
THE RAPE FACTS ARE GENERALLY PRETTY EMPTY. THEY
DON'T KNOW WHERE YOU ARE, WHEN YOU'VE
EXPERIENCED SOMETHING LIKE THAT, OR YOU CAN
AT LEAST HAVE THE EMPATHY TO UNDERSTAND WHAT
SOMEONE WHO'S EXPERIENCED THAT IS FEELING
THAT CAN REALLY KIND OF REGRESS YOU THE SAME
AS YOU KNOW, I'VE ALSO BEEN A VICTIM OF RAPE,
HAVING A RAPE THREAT, EVEN THOUGH I KNOW IT'S
AN EMPTY THREAT, IT CAN SEND YOU BACK TO A
HEADSPACE WHERE YOU DON'T KNOW THAT YOU'RE
SAFE... WE'VE JUST SPOKEN ABOUT IN THE GAMES,
BUT IT CAN BE TAKEN INTO SOCIAL MEDIA, BECAUSE
OF THOSE HANDLES, OBVIOUSLY, LIKE THEY THEN
START ABUSING OR HARASSING PEOPLE ON THEIR
SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNTS. AND AGAIN, THEN IT CAN
BE TAKEN TO ACTUAL STALKING." - MOLLIE, 21**



"I JOINED A FEW CLANS INCLUDING ALL WOMEN CLANS, AND CLANS FOR MORE MATURE PLAYERS. AS A CLAN MEMBER, I BEGAN PLAYING OPEN ONLINE AGAIN, AND OCCASIONALLY MY CREW WOULD NEED TO ADD A COUPLE OF GAMERS TO FILL UP A TEAM IN A GAME. AS PART OF A CLAN, MY CLAN MEMBERS ALWAYS SHUT DOWN ANY STUPIDITY/RUDE COMMENTS, BUT IT DID NOT COMPLETELY ELIMINATE THEM. WHEN A COUPLE OF RANDOMS JOINED OUR TEAM TO PLAY, THEY BEGAN ASKING WHY MY NAME WAS CHOCOKITTY, AND THEN ASKED IF I WERE BLACK - AND BEGAN MAKING COMMENTS ABOUT BLACK PEOPLE. MY CLAN MATES IMMEDIATELY BOOTED THEM FROM THE GAME AND REPORTED THEM."

- DOMINIQUE, 54



"THERE HAVE BEEN TIMES IN GAMES LIKE COD, AND HALO IN BIG TEAM BATTLES OR KING OF THE HILL/CAPTURE THE FLAG STYLE PLAY WHERE ONCE PLAYERS REALIZED I WAS A WOMAN, GANGED UP ON ME AND EVEN "SPAWN CAMPED" TO ENSURE THAT I WAS UNABLE TO PLAY. WHEN I ASKED FOR THEM TO STOP, I WAS GREETED WITH COMMENTS LIKE "GO MAKE ME A SANDWICH." I ALWAYS BLOCKED AND REPORTED ANYONE WHO WAS A RUDE PLAYER. AFTER A WHILE, I STOPPED PLAYING OPEN ONLINE - THAT IS, I ONLY PLAYED ONLINE WITH PEOPLE I KNEW."

- DOMINIQUE, 54

Sometimes due to my success in a game, other times just for seemingly no reason, I'll get called names like "bitch" or "c*nt" or harassed about how I play, based on my gender. Sometimes I'll get asked for my number or catcalled. These instances are usually because I spoke on chat or because of my username – Dr Sarah Hays

DOES ANYONE EVER CALL OUT THIS BEHAVIOUR?

"EVERY TIME I'VE EXPERIENCED [HARASSMENT OR MISOGYNY], IT'S EITHER BEEN A DOGPILE, OR THEY LAUGH IT OFF AND MOVE ON. I THINK IT'S SOMETHING THAT YOU KIND OF HAVE TO ACCEPT IN YOURSELF, WHICH IS REALLY UNFORTUNATE. YOU'RE LIKE, IF I'M GOING TO GO ONLINE AND GAME TONIGHT, THEN I HAVE TO ACCEPT THAT I'M PROBABLY GOING TO HAVE TO JUST DEAL WITH COMMENTS. NOT EVERYBODY DOES IT, BUT IT HAPPENS SO OFTEN THAT CALLING IT OUT WILL JUST MAKE YOU THE TARGET AND THEN YOU WILL NEVER BE ABLE TO ENJOY THAT GAME."

- MOLLIE, 21

“People often express that their experiences aren't taken as seriously, both by coaches and others, unless they have explicit proof of the harassment (think similar to police reporting of sexual assault/harassment). Coaches have tried to dismiss the reports of members of our community due to various reasons, such as "boys will be boys" or "they're just teasing" even when evidence is provided. Other times, individuals will get into trouble for reporting because of their gathering of evidence and that being found as offensive to the other person for exposing their conversations. There are little to no disciplinary standards, and fewer are enforced.” – Dr Sarah Hays

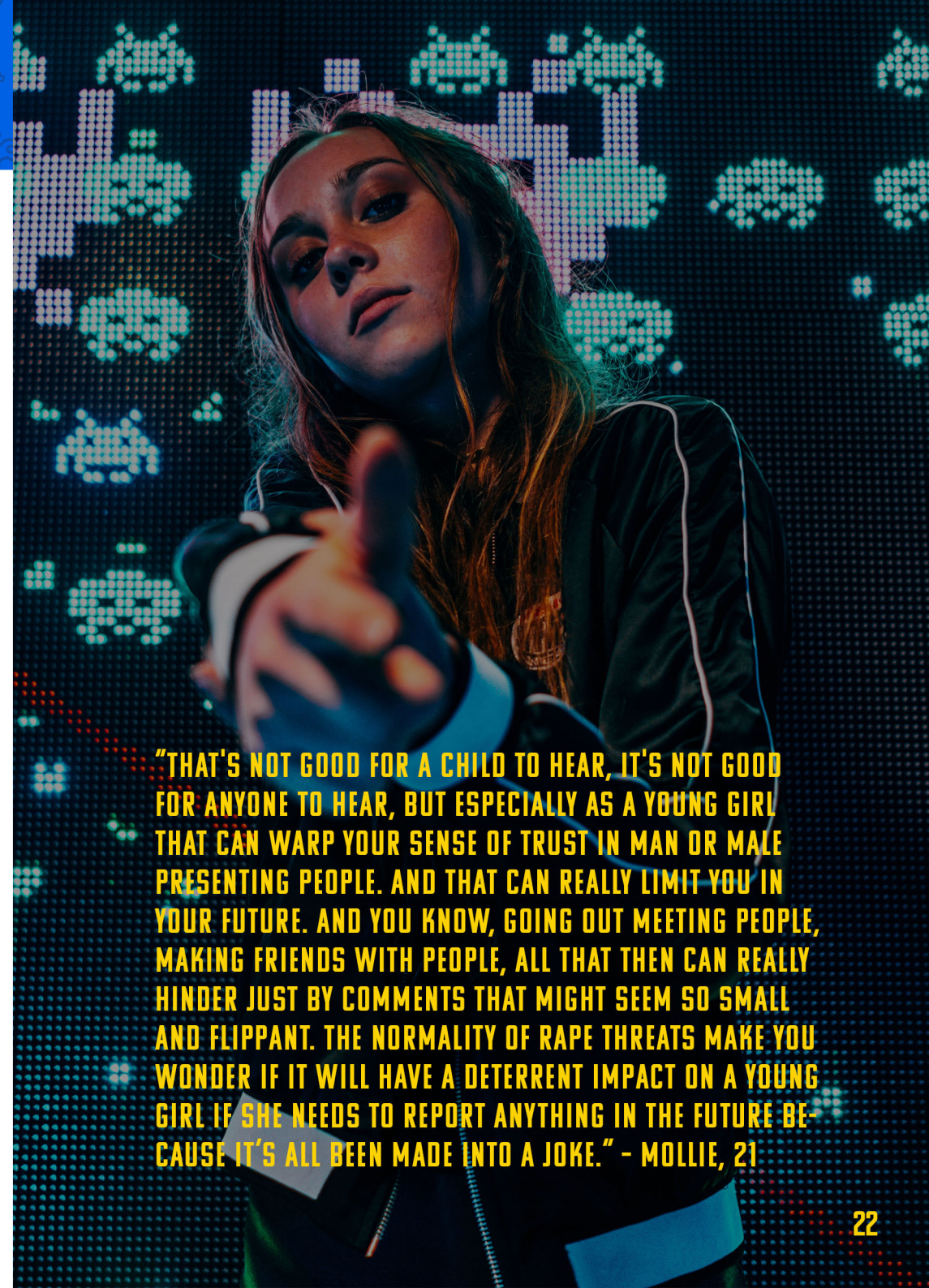
WHAT IS THE IMPACT ON YOUNG GIRLS AND WOMEN?

Some of the female gamers we spoke to were victims/survivors of sexual harassment and/or sexual assault, including rape. They emphasised how distressing it was to see hurtful language that triggered a traumatic event used so flippantly by male users. One woman said that she believed men use this language because it “plays into women's innate fears... they know it's the worst thing a woman could experience. They play into that fear of knowing that we fear men generally”.

Women again highlighted the age range of players and, as more children are gaming younger, the possibility of this abuse being targeted at very young girls. While gaming can be a positive formative experience, concerns were raised about how these threats would impact a young girl's development and future if she were to become a victim of sexual violence:

“I THINK THE THING THAT CONCERNS ME MOST IS, IF YOU'RE A YOUNG GIRL AND YOU'RE AT HOME, ALONE AND GOT YOUR HEADSET ON, AND YOU'RE NOT SURE HOW TO DEAL WITH THOSE COMMENTS... IT'S NOT ALWAYS EASY TO ACTUALLY FIND A WAY TO REPORT THESE THINGS IN GAME AND SOMETIMES WHERE YOU REPORT THINGS THAT DOESN'T ACTUALLY GO ANYWHERE ANYWAY.” - LISA, 27

Discussion also centred around dispelling the notion that rape jokes and misogyny are just “banter”, as this has an impact on how men view women in society.



“THAT'S NOT GOOD FOR A CHILD TO HEAR, IT'S NOT GOOD FOR ANYONE TO HEAR, BUT ESPECIALLY AS A YOUNG GIRL THAT CAN WARP YOUR SENSE OF TRUST IN MAN OR MALE PRESENTING PEOPLE. AND THAT CAN REALLY LIMIT YOU IN YOUR FUTURE. AND YOU KNOW, GOING OUT MEETING PEOPLE, MAKING FRIENDS WITH PEOPLE, ALL THAT THEN CAN REALLY HINDER JUST BY COMMENTS THAT MIGHT SEEM SO SMALL AND FLIPPANT. THE NORMALITY OF RAPE THREATS MAKE YOU WONDER IF IT WILL HAVE A DETERRENT IMPACT ON A YOUNG GIRL IF SHE NEEDS TO REPORT ANYTHING IN THE FUTURE BECAUSE IT'S ALL BEEN MADE INTO A JOKE.” - MOLLIE, 21



HOW ARE GAMING COMPANIES RESPONDING TO THE PROBLEM?

Gaming companies are aware that misogyny and sexual harassment occurs on virtual platforms. Many of them have taken steps to try to tackle the problem. While approaches may differ, the majority of game developers have zero-tolerance policies towards activities that could be considered abusive.

Some gamers praise League of Legends, for example, where a player found guilty of any form of abusive behaviour is likely to have their account banned permanently. As recently as May 2021, Call of Duty announced that it over the last 12 months it had:

- Banned more 350,000 accounts for racist names or toxic behaviour following player-submitted reports;
- ✕ Deployed new in-game filters to catch potentially offensive usernames, clan tags or profiles;
- Implemented new technology to filter potentially offensive text chat.

Call of Duty's public statements suggests they are taking a serious and proactive approach to sexism and harassment, acknowledging that addressing the issue requires an ongoing, unwavering commitment. As part of this, they have also promised to introduce more resources to support detection; continue to review their enforcement policies, and increase communication with the community. These steps are all harmonious with the recommendations put forward by our focus group.

Other documented efforts include a unique approach from Valve Corporation, the game developer behind the production of the popular Dota series, Left 4 Dead, Day of Defeat and Counter-Strike, among others. Valve implements an "overwatch" system, a community-driven initiative by which players are assigned a behaviour score.

The players who have a high behaviour score are asked to review suspected cases of poor behaviour and pass judgement. Dota players also have the option of blocking or avoiding a player for all future play, while Counter-Strike allows the user to kick a person out of the game.

Doxing, an issue raised by our panel, is a challenge for game developers as it is hard to stop a player from divulging their details if they are scammed into revealing them to a player in a conversation. However, game developers are making an effort to ensure that their databases, which contain the details of players' IP addresses, are protected. This goes some way to preventing this form of harassment.

Some have taken their commitment to listening the gaming community one step further. Riot Games, the developer behind League of Legends and Valorant, announced plans last month to record and/or listen to voice chat during Valorant games, to root out toxicity. Riot Games insists that it will only listen to specific recordings once they are flagged as containing racist, threatening, or otherwise toxic behaviour.

It appears that many leading companies in the gaming industry are devising new initiatives to respond to an age-old problem, and this is cause for praise. It should be acknowledged that this report found that some women do not feel comfortable using the systems in place, nor do they trust them to make a difference.

However, efforts are being made. Our respondents acknowledged that regulation of the online community faces unique challenges compounded by the diversity of players and their behaviours. Nonetheless, YGAM's report has highlighted the need for a cultural change to prevent misogyny and harassment in gaming. This starts with education.





RECOMMENDATIONS

Our recommendations are overall two-fold. The gaming community is reflective of wider society, and our focus group concluded that with sexual harassment and misogyny in any form, including its intersectionality with other factors of identity, correction starts with the education of potential perpetrators. We hope that if parents understand the realities and dangers of online gaming, they will be able to guide their children to game safely and without causing harm to others. If boys and young men (the most common kind of perpetrator in this case) understand the effects of rape jokes and are taught from an early age that gaming is not an activity reserved for boys, they will not grow up using offensive language or holding discriminatory views.


But we know that education is not the only answer. For those who do proceed to use such language and commit acts of harassment, we need better structures in place both to hold perpetrators to account and support victims.

1. INFORM PARENTS OF THE REALITIES AND DANGERS OF ONLINE GAMING.

Parents of young gamers – even those who have gamed themselves – admitted that there are many aspects of the fast-moving world of games that need demystifying. They acknowledged that they would allow their children to play games with high PEGI rating based on a quick skim of the content, without considering other aspects of the game. For example, some were shocked to learn that games such as FIFA, which has a PEGI rating of 3+, have online chat or functions that meant that their children could be talking to anyone of any age.

While parents were aware of the possibility that their child could be subjected to online bullying on social media, many had never thought about this occurring within gaming, and especially did not think of the gaming space as a place for sexual harassment.

On lessons that parents could teach their children about how to act online came recommendations that parents explain to boys the distress and trauma that girls and women experience on the end of rape jokes.



Of equal importance to some of our case studies was building confidence in boys to challenge harassment and abuse in games, with one study from the US suggesting that only 41% of women feel that men are doing all they can to support gender equality, including taking steps to reduce gender discrimination and harassment. Parents must “take it as seriously as you would if your child said, “my friend in the playground said this to me”, or as they’d asked you to consider going to a party with a stranger”, said one of our female gamers.

Informing parents of the dangers should also involve education on safeguarding and support in the event that they receive harmful comments, while reminding parents that gaming is a positive experience. For example, one of our case studies advised against taking away games from girls if they are being mistreated on them because it sends the wrong message: “that almost feels like you’re punishing them for the crime of existing in a video game as a woman”.

YGAM has recently launched the first website of its kind, the Parent Hub, that encompasses this aim to inform parents. With resources such as a ‘Gaming Glossary’ and ‘Game Guides’, it aims to give parents an example of the differing mechanics and playstyles available to children and young people – including how to spot games with online functionality and what this really means for their child.

2. EDUCATE BOYS AS YOUNG AS POSSIBLE ON WHAT CONSTITUTES SEXUAL HARASSMENT, THE EFFECTS OF RAPE JOKES, AND THAT GAMING IS FOR EVERYONE.

Female gamers we spoke to believed that the root of the problem is sexism in wider society, and emphasised that this starts at a young age. In relation to misogynistic attitudes in gaming, such as the notion that gaming is a male sport or that women do not possess the skills necessary to game, women observed that sport in school is still divided at an early age and, as such, “unfortunately, gaming just falls into the boys category pretty much from birth”.

During the pandemic, more men, women and children have engaged with online games as a pastime activity and for socialising, while more children now have greater access to games through laptops provided for online schooling. Online functionality is ingrained in modern games, and children need to be better educated about how to use it appropriately and safely.





"IF YOU WERE TO SHOW THE AVERAGE PARENT A 30 SECOND CLIP OF WHAT CAN HAPPEN ON ONE OF THESE GAMES, THEIR JAW WOULD DROP. I THINK IT'S JUST AS SIMPLE AS THAT SAYING THAT THIS IS WHAT CAN HAPPEN, THAT THE CHAT IS FREE AND ANYONE CAN CHAT TO YOUR TO YOUR CHILD." - MATTHEW BARR, ACADEMIC AND FATHER OF 2


"ONLINE INTERACTION IS NOT RATED, AND THAT DOESN'T CLICK WITH A LOT OF PARENTS WHO AREN'T TECH SAVVY. PEGI RATINGS CAN'T CAPTURE THE AGE RATING OF PEOPLE ONLINE, PEOPLE ARE GOING TO ACT HOW THEY WANT TO ACT IRRESPECTIVE OF IF IT'S A THREE PLUS GAME OR AN 18 PLUS GAME. " - MATTHEW BARR, ACADEMIC AND FATHER OF 2

"WHEN [MY DAUGHTER] WAS SIX/SEVEN, SHE WAS TOLD BY A BOY THAT SHE COULDN'T DO POKEMON FOR HER SHOW AND TELL, BECAUSE GAMES WERE FOR BOYS." - MATTHEW BARR, ACADEMIC AND FATHER OF 2

RECENT OBSERVATIONS RECORDED THE FOLLOWING ALERTS DURING GAMING SESSIONS:

"I THINK WE NEED TO FOCUS ON BOTH PROTECTING YOUNG GIRLS AND ENSURING THAT THEY HAVE CARE AFTER THEY EXPERIENCE ABUSE. IT SHOULDN'T BE JUST "HERE'S HOW TO REPORT SOMEONE ONLINE", BECAUSE THAT DOESN'T DEAL WITH THE MENTAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE ABUSE ON THAT GIRL." - FREQUENT GAMER

"I'D NEVER THOUGHT THIS WOULD BE A SUBJECT I'D NEED TO DISCUSS WITH MY BOYS (PARTICULARLY AT THIS AGE). I THINK WE DEFINITELY NEED TO EDUCATE BOYS - WOULD THEY SAY THESE THINGS IN THE PLAYGROUND? WHY IS THAT ACCEPTABLE ONLINE? IT IS THE PARENTS' RESPONSIBILITY TO EDUCATE THEIR CHILDREN ON HOW TO ACT." - PARENT OF 3 BOYS, [2 GAMERS]



The RSE curriculum changes that officially come into effect in June 2021 in England and Wales are the ideal opportunity to promote this understanding. Gaming is covered in the primary curriculum, with the aim of educating children about the benefits of rationing their time online, and the risks of intensive use of electronic devices. But our panel suggested that children, especially young girls, would benefit from a curriculum that acknowledges the differences between the way male and female gamers are accepted within, and experience the space.

Female gamers suggested that the RSE curriculum could include:

- Specific education on the impact of rape and sexual violence jokes
- ✕ Specific education on how gaming is for everyone, regardless of gender, race and sexuality.
- ▲ Bystander training so that men (and women) feel confident in challenging toxic behaviour on games and chat functions.

"EDUCATING BOYS ABOUT BOTH STANDING UP TO PEOPLE AND HOW WHAT THEY'RE SAYING IS DEEPLY AFFECTING TO PEOPLE, PARTICULARLY WOMEN IN GAMING AND OTHER MINORITIES IN GAMING - CASUAL RACISM IS STILL RACISM, CASUAL SEXISM IS STILL SEXISM. WE NEED TO BE EDUCATING YOUNG BOYS THAT MAKING RAPE JOKES ISN'T FUNNY. IT NEVER HAS BEEN, AND IT NEVER WILL BE. IT CAN HAVE IMPLICATIONS ON PEOPLE LIKE DEVALUING THEIR SELF-WORTH, IT CAN MAKE THEM FEEL DEPRESSED, AND IT CAN INCREASE ANXIETY, ESPECIALLY AROUND MEN... IT'S OKAY TO BE ANGRY IN A VIDEO GAME. IT'S OKAY TO BE PASSIONATE IN THE GAME, BUT MAKING TARGETED ATTACKS BASED ON VERY GENERALISED ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE PERSON CAN BE REALLY HARMFUL BECAUSE YOU DON'T KNOW THAT PERSON'S EXPERIENCES. PARTICULARLY FOR SOMEONE THAT IS A VICTIM THEMSELVES, IT CAN BE REALLY HARMFUL." - MOLLIE, 21

"STOP PRETENDING THAT RUDE COMMENTS ARE JUST "BOYS BEING BOYS". ENCOURAGE CHILDREN OF BOTH GENDERS TO STAND AGAINST RUDE GENDER-BASED DISCRIMINATION."

- DOMINIQUE, 54





SAFEGUARDING GIRLS AND WOMEN FOLLOWING HARASSMENT

Educational settings cannot take action against an individual who is not in their care, but they still have a responsibility to safeguard and support the victim. It is vital that anyone that a girl or young woman chooses to turn to after harassment is able to help the victim process the comments in a healthy way, especially in the case of girls who may have been introduced to the concept of rape and sexual harassment through gaming.

Our case studies with lived experience said they had reported many instances of sexual harassment and did not see satisfactory action from the gaming companies responsible. While we would not want to suggest this is the case for all gaming companies, nonetheless schools can plug the gap created by a lack of support online, meaning that women and girls feel that they have a safe space offline. Institutions can help to safeguard girls and women by making sure that they are not only educated on how to support a young woman in the event of harassment, but they are also welcoming to children reporting online harassment to them.

Female gamers said an open culture in schools that does not dismiss reports simply because the school cannot hold the perpetrator to account, is needed, and it is crucial that teachers represent an informed front line in this regard.

For example, YGAM offers free training to teachers explaining how they can help prevent students from suffering gambling and gaming related harm, giving them the confidence to approach issues that are often cloaked in stigma and unfamiliarity given the fast-moving world of technology.

Female gamers also spoke very positively about online spaces and communities that they had found through gaming, although everyone was keen to stress that the burden should not be on women to find “coping mechanisms” for maltreatment. This included “clans” within games, meaning that women could go online with a group of only certain types of people e.g. women, and social media groups specifically for young girl gamers that are headed by a woman with lived experience of sexual harassment in gaming.

FURTHER READING:

- ✕ Female Gamers' Experience of Online Harassment and Social Support in Online Gaming: A Qualitative Study

Lavinia McLean & Mark D. Griffiths - [click here](#)

- ▲ "I Can Defend Myself": Women's Strategies for Coping With Harassment While Gaming Online

Amanda C. Cote - [click here](#)

PROFILES/CASE STUDIES

Mollie, 21, started gaming when she was 12. She said the community was toxic as soon as she joined. You can sign up to Twitch as young as 13 years old, and many profile pictures/gamer tags provide user no hint of age. Although she was much older when she received her first rape threat, she highlighted that these threats came from men who had no idea of her age.

Dr Sarah Hays is the mentorship Lead at Queer Women of Esports. She adds: "I've streamed to several other people ongoing for years and the comments are toxic, particular games get toxic, there's something called stream sniping that happens where people see that you're on the game, get onto the game, try to get into your lobby and go after you in particular to discriminate against you. I've seen overwhelmingly that games that have chat on the screen like Overwatch, or like if you're playing uno there's a tonne of toxicity in Dota there's a tonne of toxicity in will Dota two specifically League of Legends there's a lot anytime you get multiplayer where there's a chat verbal or written, it gets pretty bad."

Dominique from the US is 54 years old, and started playing videogames when she was 13. Her bad experiences gaming "overwhelmingly came from those who either had issues with me being a woman or with me being African American".

Lisa, 27, is a project manager and charity campaigner.

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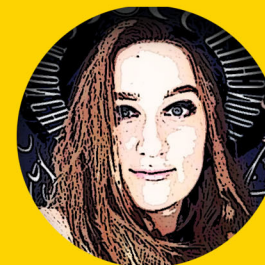
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KEV CLELLAND



MATTHEW BARR



LISA MARIE-KELLY

SHE PLAYS HE SAYS



PREVENTING SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND MISOGYNY IN GAMING

