

Summary

To Be a Girl, To Be a Boy – and Survive. Gender and Violence at School in Teenage Narratives

This monograph contains results of the Author's own research as well as a reconstruction of her previous studies concerning gender-based peer violence (including sexual harassment) which is experienced at school by 14- and 15-year-olds. The purpose of the research was to identify the forms, range and specificity of the problem which in many ways belongs to the "grey zone". In a broader perspective, the research is an attempt at establishing the impact of internalized prevalent gender stereotypes and beliefs on adolescents' experience of everyday school reality, particularly including situations of violence. In other words - in what ways the culture-specific definitions of femininity and masculinity, unequal positions of women and men in society, various expectations and pressures, norms and double standards influence on everyday school life and interpersonal relations of adolescent girls and boys.

The main part of the research was conducted at four village schools (46% of respondents) and three city schools (54%) in seven different locations. In total, the research involved 358 students attending second and third grade of junior high school, aged 14 and 15, 55% of whom were girls and 45% were boys. In order to gather and analyze data, various methods and procedures were applied (triangulation), following the processual model of qualitative research: a questionnaire with standardized open and closed questions focusing on the problem; focus group interview; in-depth individual interview focusing on the problem; visual ethnography conducted using biographic photo documentation called "A Day in the Life of Junior High School Girl/Boy".

There are three essential parts of the book. The first part is theoretical. It introduces the issue and includes the explication of basic terms, the characteristics of the development of adolescents, and the overview of Polish and global research on relations between peer violence and gender. The second chapter presents the methodology of the Author's research as well as a description of the trial and research procedure. In the third chapter, there are research results and its analysis, and therefore the collected data of various types, narratives and forms of expression serve as the basis for an attempt to restore the teenagers' experience of everyday school life including gender-based violence in peer relations.

According to the statements of students participating in the research, the experience of gender-based violence and sexual harassment in school life is widespread. More than half of adolescents encounter it frequently. There is a multitude of diverse gender- and sexual-based violent behaviours in peer relations described by respondents as “daily” or “regular”, which they experienced as a perpetrator, a victim or a witness, for instance: using vulgar expressions regarding gender, ridiculing, stigmatizing in sexual context, expressing contempt about the other gender or related to one’s gender, telling abusive and vulgar jokes regarding gender and sexuality; violation of one’s personal space such as unwelcome touching, squeezing, tickling, patting, pinching, pressing, rubbing, blocking the possibility of movement; commenting on someone with whistles, smacks, pecks or other “animal” sounds; showing or distributing pictures, films, drawings with sexual and/or vulgar or pornographic context to people who do not want that; watching pornography without the consent of people accompanying, making gestures or allusions with sexual references; hitting, pushing, kicking with a comment or an insult regarding gender or sexuality; publicly (loudly and plainly) commenting on someone’s body/looks, body movements, its intimate parts in a ridiculing, humiliating way; simulating sexual acts; “accidental” touching of one’s intimate parts through clothes (breasts, buttocks, genitals); taking off or dragging one’s clothes, pulling up blouses or skirts, pulling shoulder straps of blouses or bras; persistent peering, following; wrongful comments on one’s profile, photo, post on social media regarding gender or sexuality; spreading harmful lies about someone’s behaviour or their intimate relations (e.g. insulting trick photo, humiliating rumours); taking personal things out of one’s backpack or bag and displaying them (photos, underwear, personal care products and whatnots); taking away and hiding one’s clothes when they are in a changing room or locker room. The least frequent behaviours reported by the respondents were: punching, hustling, physical attacks due to conflicts between girls and boys (unfaithfulness, rejection etc.); vulgar inscriptions and drawings on boards or walls regarding girls or boys in sexual context; taking and publicizing unwanted photos or films; harassing by sending obnoxious, vulgar text messages, emails, letters, social media messages; peeping in locker room, bathroom, changing room etc.; exposing oneself publicly; sexual assault; forcing sexual intercourse.

Comparative analysis of the statements of girls and boys indicates a significant majority of perpetrators are boys in most forms of gender-based violence and sexual harassment. Girls are the victims of such violence definitely more frequently than boys. Boys experience this kind of violence mainly from other boys, while girls - both from boys (more frequently) and girls (less often or equally).

Very rarely young people report cases of gender-based violence to adults. Teenagers “conspiracy of silence” over the problems of gender-based violence is the answer to attitudes presented by adults and the cultural climate surrounding gender identity, gender roles and sexuality. The fact that adults turn gender and sexuality issues in teenage relations into a taboo subject, together with lack of competent preparation of teachers to solve this kind of problems, further combined with low culture, absence of sexual education, myths about men, women, and relationships, cultural acceptance of male dominance, and highly internalized gender stereotypes and prejudices cause that victims are ashamed and afraid of being stigmatized. Thus, they rarely share their problems with adults or seek help.