Countering gendered violence in schools: The growing threat of tech-facilitated harassment & online abuse

Bullying, violence, sexual harassment and emotional abuse are serious health and safety issues for teachers and school staff. Employers, governments and school communities must set the tone that such behaviour is not acceptable in any context and will not be tolerated.

School employers and policy makers must take urgent action to address the growing threat of GenAI material being used as a form of gendered violence against students and school staff.

The IEU is receiving weekly reports of disturbing cases of deepfake and online harassment of female students and teachers.

Countering abuse requires more than just condemnation - it demands a shared commitment to building strong school cultures based on safety, gender equity, and mutual respect.

Prevention and minimisation of threats through policy, education & regulation

1) School policies must be updated and enforced

Policies at the school and system level must be reviewed and updated, in consultation with employees and their union, to address new and emerging threats to workplace health and safety and any new legal requirements.

Harassment, bullying and technology policies must be reviewed to ensure they explicitly cover:

- verbally and physically abusive behaviour by all members of the school community, including students and parents;
- deepfake content created by GenAI;
- image-based abuse; and
- online sexual harassment.

School staff should be provided with time to attend specialised training and access to expert support to recognise and respond to image-based and online abuse.

The eSafety Commissioner's Toolkit for Schools is a valuable resource for school employers.

2) Digital literacy and respectful relationship education

School leaders and teachers require additional time to **train in,** implement and teach age-appropriate programs for students that include:

- respectful relationships, sexual consent and online behaviour;
- dangers of deepfake technology; and
- legal consequences of image-based abuse and online harassment.

To ease workload pressures and ensure high-quality programs, teaching materials and resources should be centrally developed by education experts.

3) Legislative protections and mandatory AI guardrails

The production, distribution, or sharing of sexually explicit deepfakes that depict a real, identifiable person should be a criminal offence in all states and territories. Employers and schools must comply with relevant child protection and mandatory reporting obligations.

The IEU also supports the recommendations of the Senate Select Committee on Adopting Artificial Intelligence that seeks to provide national protections and guardrails for the use of AI systems and other new technologies, including:

- the need for an over-arching AI Act to provide consistent coordination and oversight of AI;
- the use of Occupational Health and Safety frameworks in response to the workplace risks posed by the adoption of AI**;** and
- placing a positive duty on employers to proactively identify and mitigate the risks of AI.

Employer duty of care and support mechanisms for school staff

School employers must implement and adhere to best practice response strategies.

The wellbeing of staff and students who experience harassment must come first and any potential criminal offence must be immediately reported to police. Concerns about a school's reputation, enrolments, or potential parental backlash can never justify inaction or inadequate responses. Schools have a duty to respond swiftly, supportively, and without compromise.

- Schools must respond to cases of harassment decisively, while ensuring the privacy and wellbeing of the employee affected.
- Matters need to be thoroughly investigated and the services of external experts (e.g. IT forensic services) utilised where necessary.
- Deepfake and online harassment may breach criminal laws (e.g. image-based abuse, child exploitation material). In such cases prompt reporting to the police is essential.
- Staff need to be aware of their rights under anti-discrimination, workplace safety and criminal law. Schools should work with the IEU and union delegates to educate and inform staff.

The ongoing support and protection of employees experiencing harassment is critical:

- victims should be provided with access to confidential employer**-**provided psychological counselling and peer support; and
- school employers should assist affected employees with any action needed to takedown abusive content from social media or online platforms as a matter of urgency.

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