

Schools as Pivotal Agents in Tackling Sexual Violence and Harassment Among Adolescents

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~ The study provides insights into the normative regulation of sexual violence and harassment in secondary education and shows how national and school documents are understood by professionals working in Slovenian secondary schools. It also highlights their understanding of sexual violence and harassment as a pressing social problem that affects the school environment. Data were collected in two phases. First, national documents on sexual violence and harassment were analysed, followed by a review of school documents from selected secondary schools in Slovenia. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four head-teachers, four school counsellors, and four teachers from these secondary schools. Content analysis was used for data analysis. The findings suggest that, while formal frameworks are necessary, they are insufficient without institutional cultures that actively challenge gender hierarchies embedded in the hidden curriculum.

Keywords: adolescents, national and school documents, school professionals, secondary schools, sexual violence and harassment

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Šole kot ključni dejavniki pri obravnavi spolnega nasilja in nadlegovanja med mladostniki

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≈ Raziskava ponuja vpogled v normativno urejanje spolnega nasilja in nadlegovanja v srednješolskem izobraževanju ter prikazuje, kako strokovni delavci v slovenskih srednjih šolah razumejo nacionalne in šolske dokumente. Hkrati osvetljuje njihovo razumevanje spolnega nasilja in nadlegovanja kot perečega družbenega problema, ki vpliva na šolsko okolje. Podatki so bili zbrani v dveh fazah. Najprej so bili analizirani nacionalni dokumenti, ki obravnavajo spolno nasilje in nadlegovanje, nato pa je sledila analiza šolskih dokumentov izbranih srednjih šol v Sloveniji. Poleg tega so bili izvedeni polstrukturirani intervjuji s štirimi ravnatelji, štirimi šolskimi svetovalnimi delavci in s štirimi učitelji iz teh srednjih šol. Za analizo podatkov je bila uporabljena analize vsebine. Ugotovitve kažejo, da so formalni okviri sicer nujni, vendar brez institucionalnih kultur, ki dejavno obravnavajo in problematizirajo spolne hierarhije, vpete v skriti kurikulum, ostajajo nezadostni.

Ključne besede: mladostniki, nacionalni in šolski dokumenti, strokovni delavci v šolah, srednje šole, spolno nasilje in nadlegovanje

Introduction

Sexual violence and harassment are complex social phenomena that are often difficult to recognise and address in society and schools (Jansen, 2016; Podreka, 2017). They include a wide range of behaviours (physical, verbal, and non-verbal) that violate bodily integrity, personal boundaries, and the right to make decisions about one's own body (Jansen, 2016). Lack of consent is central, although power imbalances and situational factors may complicate its interpretation, and non-resistance does not imply consent (Podreka, 2017). Given this complexity, it is important to consider the overall context of each incident rather than relying on a single definition or criterion (Jansen, 2016). The field of sexual violence includes multiple overlapping terms, such as sexual abuse, assault, and harassment. Sexual harassment, a form often trivialised in society and schools, is legally distinct from sexual violence but can have serious and long-lasting consequences (Podreka et al., 2021). It is broadly defined as unwanted sexual attention behaviours (de Lijster et al., 2016).

Secondary schools, as one of the most influential social environments after the family, play a crucial role in preventing and addressing sexual violence among adolescents, where such issues are often hidden and influenced by peer pressure, gender norms, and broader societal expectations (Hill & Kearl, 2011; Rizzo et al., 2020; Talić, 2017). As institutions, schools operate through a network of formal and informal rules that regulate not only students' behaviour but also the roles and responsibilities of school professionals. These norms are transmitted both explicitly, through official policies and regulations, and implicitly, through what is commonly referred to as the hidden curriculum. This concept highlights that educational practice is not neutral; rather, it is embedded in and sustained by broader social, cultural, and ideological influences that shape everyday interactions and power relations within schools (Bregar Golobič, 2004; Conroy, 2013). Understanding, questioning, and transforming the gendered and other social hierarchies reproduced through such institutional practices therefore requires a critical pedagogical approach. As outlined by Webb et al. (2002), feminist pedagogy seeks to transform traditional power relations within educational settings, particularly the hierarchical divide. It emphasises empowerment, mutual respect, community building, and the validation of lived experience as legitimate knowledge, while actively challenging dominant norms and exclusionary practices. By fostering critical reflection and shared authority in the school, feminist pedagogy positions education as a space for social transformation and for interrogating gendered and other structural inequalities.

It is essential, when addressing sexual violence and harassment among adolescents, to treat it separately from general peer violence, as prevention measures must take into account heteronormative roles, gender inequality, and broader societal influences such as gender stereotypes and pornography (Connell, 2012; Dines, 2017; Hearn, 1998; Hrženjak, 2011; Jewell & Brown, 2014; Laftman et al., 2020; Liston & Rahimi, 2013; MacKelvie et al., 2017; McClure, 2001; Timmerman, 2003). It is important to also highlight the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1996), which is the type of masculinity at the top of the hierarchy and is more valued than other forms of masculinity. When we talk about this, we are not just referring to a list of attributes, but rather to a description of what must be done and achieved for an individual to rise above others (Rizzo et al., 2020). Adolescents' understandings of gender and appropriate behaviour are shaped by multiple influences during their formative years, which can normalise harmful practices that remain socially acceptable or even desirable for certain genders.

At the same time, school professionals' perceptions and responses are influenced by their own beliefs, stereotypes, and prejudices, affecting how sexual violence is interpreted and addressed (Fineran et al., 1999; Meyer, 2008). Sexual violence and harassment are often normalised as everyday school "jokes" (The Women and Equalities Committee, 2016), blurring the boundaries between conflict, harassment, and socially accepted gendered behaviour (Larkin, 1994). To ensure these behaviours are recognised and addressed seriously, secondary schools require clear, structured guidance through formal frameworks. The development of such a framework, both at the national level and within individual schools, is therefore crucial from several perspectives. Firstly, these documents establish regulations by specifying procedures, reporting channels, and responsible personnel, thus creating formal protocols for remedial action. Secondly, they require schools to implement prevention and awareness-raising measures. Thirdly, such documents have symbolic significance, signalling institutional responsibility and moral support for victims and the wider school community. Finally, secondary schools need to address behaviour that, while not necessarily criminal, nevertheless violates the integrity of the individual (Suhovršnik, 2022). In 2024, the Scottish Government published the first comprehensive whole-school framework for preventing and responding to gender-based violence. It is intended to support different levels of education, including secondary, and aims to build understanding of the range of behaviours that gender-based violence can encompass. The framework demonstrates how this type of violence may affect children and adolescents within a school community and may intersect with various characteristics. It also highlights how schools

can challenge the gender inequality that causes gender-based violence and provides guidance to support schools' responses. This framework is an example of good practice, although it is non-statutory, meaning it is designed to assist schools in making decisions (Scottish Government, 2024). Scotland also has various legal obligations that schools must consider as part of their approach to gender-based violence.

In Slovenia, secondary education comprises general high schools and vocational secondary schools, with students typically aged 15 to 19. Slovenian secondary schools operate within a formal framework that can be divided into two levels: national documents and school documents. However, there is currently no systematic overview identifying which documents at either level are relevant to this area, their respective significance, or whether school professionals are aware of and actively use them. A frequently voiced criticism in connection with past cases of violence in schools is insufficient knowledge among school professionals of relevant documents (Tašner & Berčnik, 2019). Krek (2020) points out that even in cases of repeated violence, teachers tend to deal only with the circumstances of individual incidents rather than taking a systematic approach. He suggests that schools recognise the structural causes of violence and integrate this perspective into moral education plans and teachers' work. This would enable schools to reduce violence and disruptive behaviour through educational and support strategies tailored to the specific structural causes. Slovenia also lacks comprehensive research on the prevalence of sexual violence and harassment among adolescents, which contributes to confusion and an unclear formal framework within secondary schools.

Based on the presented findings, three key research questions were posed:

1. How do selected national and school documents regulate the prevention of and response to sexual violence and harassment in secondary schools?
2. How familiar are school professionals with selected national and school documents addressing sexual violence and harassment in secondary schools, what are their opinions of these documents, and how do these perceptions differ among school professionals?
3. How do school professionals understand sexual violence and harassment in secondary schools, and how do they define their role in preventing and responding to it?

Method

Participants

To gain a deeper understanding of how sexual violence and harassment are addressed in Slovenian secondary schools at both national and school levels, the study used a qualitative research design combining both document analysis and semi-structured interviews. Prior to conducting the interviews, a document analysis was conducted, focusing on relevant documents addressing sexual violence and harassment at both national and school levels. The selection of documents followed a purposive sampling strategy. A broad exploratory review of existing policy and guidance documents addressing sexual violence and harassment in Slovenian secondary schools was undertaken. Based on this mapping, documents were included in the analysis if they met the following criteria: relevance to the national context, relevance to secondary school settings and focus on violence in schools (particularly sexual violence and harassment).

At the national level, the following documents were analysed: the *School Regulations for the Secondary Level* (PISRS, 2018), the *Protocol for Recognising and Dealing with Peer Violence in Educational Institutions* (Lešnik Mugnaioni et al., 2015), and *Violence in Schools: Definition, Recognition, Prevention and Treatment* (Lešnik Mugnaioni et al., 2009). The *Criminal Code* (PISRS, 2008) was also initially mapped as a relevant national-level document; however, it was excluded from the analysis as it did not meet the inclusion criteria. At the school level, the documents of four secondary schools that participated in the interviews were analysed. These included the school rules of all four secondary schools, as well as the annual work plan of one school, as it was the only one publicly available. School development plans were also initially mapped as a relevant school-level document, but were subsequently excluded from the analysis as they were not publicly accessible for these secondary schools.

In addition, approximately fifteen secondary schools in central Slovenia (Ljubljana) were contacted and invited to participate. Initial contact was made with school counsellors, who were asked to forward the invitation to the head-teachers and all teachers. As mentioned, four secondary schools agreed to take part in the study. After schools confirmed their willingness to participate, individual participants were contacted to arrange interview dates.

Each secondary school was represented by one head-teacher, one school counsellor, and one teacher. A total of 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted with four head-teachers, four school counsellors, and four teachers. The included schools varied in terms of curriculum (high school and vocational

secondary school) and gender composition (proportion of male and female students).

Instrument

In the first phase, publicly available documents at national and school level on sexual violence and harassment were collected. In the second phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted using a prepared guide with open key questions and spontaneously formulated sub-questions (Vogrinc, 2008). All 12 interviews took place in their schools between the 11th of May and 3rd of June 2022, lasting between 30 and 90 minutes. The questions were based on the research objectives, and all interviews were recorded. The data were collected as part of the author's master's thesis research (Suhovršnik, 2022).

Research Design

Data were analysed using qualitative content analysis, with the aim of identifying key themes and codes in the material (Bryman, 2016). The coding process was applied to both document and interview data. The analysis involved several stages, including organising the material, identifying coding units, coding, and grouping related codes into broader thematic categories. Relevant categories were then defined and linked, contributing to a theoretical understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Mesec, 1998; Vogrinc, 2008). For reasons of clarity, only the main categories are presented in this manuscript. Table 1 displays the categories, subcategories, and the number of codes to visualise the coding process.

Table 1

Coding System – Categories, Subcategories and Number of Codes

CODING SYSTEM		
Categories	Subcategories	Number of codes
Preventive activities and models for the area of (peer) violence at the classroom or school level		8
The roles of different actors in the prevention of violence		3
Teamwork within the school and with external institutions		13
Immediate and process intervention		11

CODING SYSTEM		
Categories	Subcategories	Number of codes
Educational measures	Sanctions	1
	Initiation and management of educational measures	6
	Imposition of disciplinary measures and appeals against such measures	4
	Alternative measures	2
Models designed to respond to and address violence that has already occurred		15

All interviews were transcribed prior to analysis. Participants were categorised and reported as follows: head-teachers (HT1–4), school counsellors (SC1–4) and teachers (T1–4).

Results

Regulating the Prevention of and Response to Sexual Violence and Harassment in Secondary Schools

To answer the first research question, selected national and school documents addressing the prevention of and response to sexual violence and harassment in secondary schools were analysed. In accordance with the previously defined criteria, the following documents were included in the analysis: the *School Regulations for the Secondary Level* (PISRS, 2018), the *Protocol for Recognising and Dealing with Peer Violence in Educational Institutions* (Lešnik Mugnaioni et al., 2015), and *Violence in Schools: Definition, Recognition, Prevention and Treatment* (Lešnik Mugnaioni et al., 2009). Our analysis shows that the *School Regulations for the Secondary Level* (PISRS, 2018) significantly influence the pedagogical work of schools and the process of pedagogical action. This set of regulations serves as an important foundation for the development of school documents, meaning that each school is required to formulate its own pedagogical concept in accordance with this national document. In contrast, the *Protocol for Recognising and Dealing with Peer Violence in Educational Institutions* (Lešnik Mugnaioni et al., 2015) and *Violence in Schools: Definition, Recognition, Prevention and Treatment* (Lešnik Mugnaioni et al., 2009) are not legally binding at the national level. Professionals may use these documents as

guidelines for action, and while they provide valuable information for preventive measures, adherence to them is not mandatory.

Selected national documents on sexual violence and harassment emphasise that schools must decide whether to implement prevention measures at the classroom or whole-school level and select appropriate models, such as workshops or interpersonal approaches. Head-teachers and school counselling centres play a key role in shaping school climate, supporting students, motivating staff, and implementing both prevention and intervention measures, while effective management is strengthened through teamwork, training, and cooperation with external actors. Curative measures outline immediate and gradual responses, involve all relevant parties, allow for alternative disciplinary approaches, and stress the importance of clearly explaining why certain behaviours are unacceptable.

In our analysis of school documents, we included the school rules from all four secondary schools and one school's annual work plan. Most of the included documents focus on the importance of preventive measures taken by schools to raise awareness of different forms of violence, risky sexual behaviour, safety, and sex education. The documents emphasise the promotion of appropriate behaviour, the acceptance of basic values, and informing students about how to seek help in emergency situations. The outcomes related to curative measures correspond to those of the national documents – they mention educational and alternative measures, offences, and prohibitions such as inappropriate behaviour towards students, violence of any kind, and endangering one's own life or the life and health of others.

School Professionals' Familiarity With and Opinions on National and School Documents

The aim of the second research question was to examine school professionals' familiarity with selected national and school documents addressing sexual violence and harassment in secondary schools, their views on these documents, and differences of these perceptions among them. The school professionals interviewed were generally more familiar with broad and general international and national documents (e.g. the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (*Konvencija o otrokovih pravicah*, 1990) and the *Constitution* (PISRS, 1991)), rather than the national documents which were included in our document analysis. Nevertheless, we found that school counsellors were the most familiar with the analysed national documents on sexual violence and harassment, followed by teachers, while head-teachers were the least familiar with the

documents. One of the teachers interviewed noted that there is no systematic familiarisation with these documents in the education system:

To be completely honest, when it comes to dealing with these documents, it is a matter for each teacher as an individual. I read them solely because, as a sociologist, I am particularly interested in this topic, and I collaborate with certain experts in this field. (T4)

We then asked the interviewees (regardless of their level of familiarity) for their opinions on the national documents that were included in our analysis. They expressed mixed views (with some considering them partially adequate and others inadequate). The main problems included unclear procedures for victim placement and learning adaptations, fragmented responsibilities between social work centres, and over-reliance on external networks rather than formal procedures. Interviewees highlighted the need for clearer institutional accountability (ministry, police, Institute for Education, social work centres) and designated contact people, meaning that this information must be made clearer (not within the national documents, but within the state's responsibility to compile contact lists). As one teacher explained: "So maybe yes, more emphasis on that, maybe on who to turn to directly, because then help must be quick and urgent. And that's where we're lacking" (T1).

In the context of the discussion on national documents, the interviewees also pointed out some other challenges related to addressing and resolving sexual violence and harassment in schools, namely low awareness of the need for immediate documentation and limited training for all school professionals:

Yes, across the board. That includes the administrative staff as well. It's not just about those of us who teach; the point is that the school operates as a unified whole, and that we are all trained and familiar with this. (T3)

They also mentioned infrequent staff meetings and few opportunities to share good practices: "There is a lack of open discussion on this topic, of sharing experiences of all kinds [...]" (HT2). Interviewees pointed out the need to address violence earlier (preschool and primary education):

I think we should start talking about these issues as early as preschool. It seems to me [...] that by the time these young people come to us, they're already largely set in their ways. And it's not that you can't do anything, but we don't spend enough time together either [...] It seems to me that we could do significantly more in elementary schools or address these issues earlier. (SC2)

They also indicated the need to involve parents more:

I'm going to start from the very beginning. First, we need to educate families and caregivers. The government really needs to tackle this problem head-on, because children learn from their families what constitutes violence and what doesn't, who I am as a girl, and who he is as a boy. This is where it starts, and the first step is to educate caregivers and parents [...]. (T3)

Some of them also emphasised the need for a more systematic integration of the topic into school curricula: "It is clear, however, that neither I nor you have that kind of influence, unless it were systematically incorporated into the core curriculum of elementary and secondary schools" (T3). One teacher (T2) noted that, although she raises awareness of issues such as bullying in her English classes, this depends on her own initiative rather than being part of the formal curriculum, which she perceived as a key gap in the education system. There were additional concerns about curative interventions, such as respecting victim's wishes and supporting underage students without parental involvement:

[...] another aspect is that while the victim wants help – and they really do want it – they are minors and don't want their parents to find out, yet we still want to help them and somehow involve them in the process [...]. (T1)

Slow procedures and gaps between policy and practice were also highlighted:

Actually, everything looks good on paper, but the procedures take too long, and it seems to me that there isn't even proper communication [...] in practice it doesn't work. I'd say that, fortunately, I don't come across many such cases, but the ones I do encounter are actually urgent, and we have to respond immediately. (SC2)

Regarding selected school documents, most of the interviewees were familiar with the school documents which were included in our analysis. We found that head-teachers and counsellors were the most familiar with them, with head-teachers having the widest range of opinions on them due to their central role in drafting the documents. Most of the interviewees noted that (sexual) violence is defined in internal school documents, although often indirectly through terms such as "inappropriate" or "indecent behaviour". They agreed that, while school documents are important, they are also insufficient because

they cannot fully regulate individual accountability or reporting systems:

I have everything covered by the rules, I can safely say that, but the rules themselves do not solve anything. What I am still working on at school, and what the rules cannot solve, is the notification system at a particular school. For example, when a teacher notices something or hears something, it is very important, and again, I cannot write in the regulations where they should go first. Will they go to the counsellor's office or mine, or will they go to the staff room and say, 'You know what is happening to us, you will not believe it'. (HT2)

The interviewees highlighted some suggestions for improving school documents, for example that they should mandate direct communication at the start of the school year, such as head-teachers addressing classes to present school rules:

If you remind them at the beginning of each school year, especially when first-year students arrive, and go over the school policies with their teachers, introduce them to the students, and certainly, see or read repeatedly that we as a school do not support certain things, they can become more aware that such behaviour is unacceptable, or if it is something they are used to from elementary school, that we will sanction it here or that we will not tolerate it. (SC3)

However, some questioned whether adolescents would internalise these messages if the topic had not been addressed earlier in the education system.

One of the interviewed head-teachers (H1) also pointed out that, although the Inspectorate of Education (which carries out inspections to monitor the implementation of laws, regulations, and acts governing education) provides some support, the responsibility for clearer guidance should lie with the state (ministry), which must provide support for each school individually: "[...] The Ministry should be doing this, because the Inspectorate isn't an interpreter of the law – they are the bodies that impose sanctions and conduct oversight – but here they are doing this or fulfilling this role". Some also said that school documents should include more precise definitions and procedures for suspected cases, greater teacher accountability, feedback mechanisms, and a stronger commitment to professional development:

The bigger problem, though, is that they might feel that what we organise within the school is a bit forced [...] I see it more from this perspective: we're a vocational school, and they focus heavily on their specific field. It's significantly different in elementary school, because the staff

mostly comes from the Faculty of Education, whereas here they are first and foremost experts in their field. (SC2)

School Professionals' Understandings of Sexual Violence and Harassment and Their Role in Prevention and Response

The aim of the third research question was to examine how school professionals understand sexual violence and harassment in secondary schools and how they perceive their role in its prevention and response. Interviewees defined sexual violence and harassment broadly, encompassing physical, verbal, and non-verbal behaviours between strangers, peers, or romantic partners, noting that some acts remain unrecognised if not personally perceived as problematic. Understanding of sexual violence and harassment is shaped by changing social norms and professionals' own experiences: "Okay, I mean, you always have your own personal experiences too. I mean, you might have been a victim of some kind of violence yourself, and you're trying to draw on that" (T1). Social factors such as pornography, social media, misogyny, sexism, and the sexualisation of girls in media and advertising were also mentioned:

[...] social media is a very important virtual space where young people spend hours and hours, much more time than they do at school, much more than they do with their parents and they spend hours and hours there. They like posts, they watch videos [...] for example, I once showed one music video just for fun and waited to see their reactions. Not a single reaction from the students touched on sexualised physicality, and they didn't really know why I was showing them that music video. But I did it on purpose as an experiment, and here it became very, very clear just how young girls have no boundaries when it comes to this [...]. (T3)

Interviewees described gender stereotypes as granting boys greater leeway and normalising problematic behaviour, reinforced through the hidden curriculum:

[...] I see this mainly in aggressive communication, when they make comments that hurt the other person. Then I ask them how they think the other person feels about it. And they say, 'I was just joking around a little.' And the same thing happens with sexual harassment. They hide behind the excuse that they were just joking and didn't mean it seriously. (T2)

Challenges include addressing hidden forms of violence, increasing verbal harassment, and engaging students in discussion, highlighting the need for sustained attention and systematic sex education. Schools were portrayed as sensitive environments shaped by diverse backgrounds and interpretations underscoring the importance of an intersectional approach:

At our school, people hug each other; some might like that, and it can even happen among boys. [...] We're sorting these things out because we're a diverse school, and for students who come from the former southern republics, hugging and shaking hands feels quite natural. And they don't even perceive it as aggressive, but there are students who come from – I won't say necessarily a Slovenian background, but from a slightly more reserved environment – who see it as an uncomfortable situation. (SC2)

School professionals were also asked how they perceive their role in combating sexual violence and harassment. Head-teachers viewed themselves as responsible for dialogue with all stakeholders, promoting school culture and administrative management. One of the interviewed head-teachers said:

First and foremost, the principal is always the guardian of the law. That's a very broad statement, but it means that he is responsible for ensuring all aspects of well-being at the school. From mental health and so on. And for both staff and students. [...] And the head-teacher's role here is certainly to constantly draw attention to this. (HT1)

Counsellors mostly explained that they focused on supporting students in cases of sexual violence and harassment, and prevention work (e.g. workshops for students), while teachers saw their role more as recognising incidents, acting as trusted persons and integrating these issues into lessons (curricula). The role of the class teacher was emphasised as particularly important:

[...] here, the class-teacher plays a crucial role: they should be able to pick up on signs, or at the very least be someone students feel comfortable enough to approach to say that a classmate is feeling unwell. And they should recognise this as a cause for concern. (T1)

Discussion

Selected national and school documents addressing sexual violence and harassment in Slovenian secondary schools were analysed. The findings indicate a strong emphasis on prevention (awareness-raising, sex education, the

promotion of respectful behaviour and values, and informing students about available support). The documents also stress the importance of school leadership, counselling services, teamwork, and cooperation with external stakeholders, while curative measures focus on procedures for responding to incidents and the use of educational and disciplinary measures. School documents largely reflect the principles outlined in national documents, indicating a considerable degree of alignment. Similar to the system in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2024), some of the analysed documents are legally binding, whereas others primarily serve as recommendations and guidance for practice.

In our study, we found that school professionals are more familiar with broader, general documents (that are not directly addressing sexual violence and harassment), than with the national documents we analysed. Among the national documents we analysed, school counsellors were the most familiar with them, while teachers were the least familiar. It turned out that, at the systemic level, no one informs and educates teachers on these documents. This finding is consistent with what Tašner and Berčnik (2019) have previously highlighted, that a common criticism arising from past cases of school violence is that school professionals often lack sufficient knowledge of the relevant documents. Interviewees gave mixed responses to the selected national documents and suggested several improvements at the systemic level, primarily related to collaboration with external stakeholders, training for the entire school staff, parental involvement, and the need for the systematic inclusion of the topic of sexual violence across the curriculum. Interviewees also pointed to gaps between policy and practice, particularly regarding the implementation of procedures and communication between relevant actors. They noted that although formal procedures are well defined on paper, responses in practice can be too slow to adequately address urgent cases of sexual violence and harassment. Regarding school documents, head-teachers and school counsellors were most familiar with them, which makes sense, since they are the ones who mostly prepare and update them. Interviewees agreed that school documents are important but mostly insufficient. They offered some suggestions for improving school documents, primarily regarding how to put existing school documents into practice.

School professionals understand sexual violence and harassment as a broad phenomenon, while recognising that perceptions of such behaviour are shaped by personal experiences, social norms, and wider societal influences. Interviewees highlighted the role of social media, pornography, and gender stereotypes in normalising such behaviours. This understanding is consistent with the view that gender norms such as sexism and stereotypical gender roles

are reproduced in secondary schools through the hidden curriculum, which reflects broader social, cultural, and ideological forces shaping interactions and power relations within schools (Bregar Golobič, 2004; Conroy, 2013). Viewed through feminist theories and pedagogy (Conroy, 2013; Webb et al., 2002), these findings point to secondary schools as structurally gendered institutions. Interviewers also mentioned an intersectional approach that acknowledges diverse backgrounds and interpretations.

School professionals perceived their roles in preventing and responding to sexual violence and harassment as complementary: head-teachers focused on leadership and school culture, counsellors on prevention and student support, and teachers on recognising incidents, fostering trust, and addressing the topic within educational activities, with class teachers seen as particularly important in identifying and responding to concerns.

Conclusions

We cannot generalise the findings of our study; however, they do encourage us to reflect on the relationship between the formal framework for addressing and dealing with sexual violence and harassment in Slovenian secondary schools and its actual implementation in the everyday school environment. Undoubtedly, documents serve as an important foundation, but the interviewees' statements clearly indicate that equally important are the methods of disseminating information about these documents, cooperation with external institutions, and the role of broader cultural and societal gender norms in understanding sexual violence and harassment among adolescents.

Policy-makers can use these findings to improve and update existing policies, for example the need to include systematic training on relevant national and school documents for all school professionals, a clear division of responsibilities among institutions, a centralised system of contact points, financial and human resources support for schools, and also vertical integration into the education system regarding sexual violence and harassment. Secondary schools can apply findings of the study to develop or update internal school documents, enhance communication with staff and students, and raise awareness and understanding of sexual violence and harassment among students and school professionals as a broader social issue. Internationally, the study contributes to debates on sexual violence and harassment in secondary schools by demonstrating how policy implementation is mediated by embedded social and gender norms through the hidden curriculum. By combining an analysis of normative regulations in secondary education with a feminist pedagogical

perspective, this study provides a foundation for understanding why gaps in implementation can persist in education systems, even when formal regulations are well developed.

This study has some limitations. Since national documents are embedded in international frameworks (which are subsequently translated into school documents through national policy), future research could benefit from including key international legal documents in the analysis to incorporate this broader perspective. It would be great to also include broad relevant Slovenian legislation specific to secondary education. A significant limitation of the study is the generalisation of its findings. It must be acknowledged that, regardless of the sample, the fundamental purpose of qualitative research is not to generalise. Additional factors include the fact that, on the one hand, formal frameworks in this area are country-specific, and on the other hand, the study is also limited by the fact that the selected schools were located only in central Slovenia. Future research should include secondary schools from other regions to explore potential differences in school documents and in how school professionals perceive and understand sexual violence and harassment among adolescents. Finally, representative data on the prevalence of sexual violence and harassment in Slovenian secondary schools are lacking. Such data are crucial, as their absence affects both normative regulation and the seriousness with which the issue is addressed.

At the time of conducting the study, Slovenia did not yet have a specific document on the topic of sexual violence and harassment among adolescents in the context of secondary schools. However, in 2023, the Slovenian Institute for Education created a *Protocol for dealing with the detection and handling of sexual violence and sexual harassment in educational institutions* (Logar et al., 2023), which regulates the field in a more detailed manner and provides important support for all those working in schools. In 2023, they also significantly updated the existing *Protocol for Recognising and Dealing with Peer Violence in Educational Institutions* (Lešnik Mugnaioni et al., 2015). This revision is called the Protocol for dealing with the detection and handling of peer violence in educational institutions (Lešnik Mugnaioni et al., 2023). Both documents need to be included in further analyses of this field.

Ethical Statement

This research study was approved by the Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana Ethics Commission. All ethical standards for this research were strictly adhered to. Written informed consent was obtained from all

interviewees, and all personal data was anonymised to ensure that participants could not be identified. Prior to analysis, each interview transcription was reviewed and validated by the respective participant, and the audio recordings were permanently deleted once the transcripts were confirmed.

Data Statement

Qualitative research data tables were deposited at the Repository of the University of Ljubljana (<https://repozitorij.uni-lj.si/IzpisGradiva.php?id=141584&lang=slv>).

Disclosure Statement

The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

When preparing this article, the author used ChatGPT (OpenAI, GPT-5.3) on 11 and 12 February 2025 with the following prompt: "Please shorten certain sentences that are too long, and then check to make sure all sources are included at the end of the list", for the purpose of stylistic editing of selected sections of the manuscript and verifying the accuracy of the final list of references. The author subsequently reviewed and edited the output as necessary and accepted full responsibility for the content and integrity of the publication.

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