**LAD AND RAPE CULTURE IN THE UK**

My name is Lucy Owen, and I’m Rebecca Hunt, and we are both 17 year old students from Gloucestershire in the UK. We are here on behalf of the National Alliance of Women’s Organisations, NAWO, as members of their Young Women’s Alliance and are co-founders of a new branch of the organisation, NAWO Gloucestershire.

Unlike most of the other panelists that you’ll hear from today, we are by no means experts in this field. We haven’t worked for NGOs or for charity organisations, we’re just two young people from a rural town in the South of England aiming to promote equality. Today we are hoping that by talking about our personal experiences, we can share with you some of the problems that young women in the UK face with regard to rape and lad culture, as well as some of the potential solutions to these problems.

When we first told our peers at school that we were going to be coming here today to talk about lad culture, the reaction that we received was not as we had hoped. We were met with a number of negative comments and laughter, mainly from the boys, who seemed to be amused by the fact that we consider the sexist jokes that they throw around the classroom to be a problem.  But this is the very issue; young men do not see their misogynistic, pack-like behaviour as a problem despite the fact that it generates lad culture.

So when we talk about lad culture, what do we mean? Lad culture is a British subculture that involves groups of young men with a pack mentality, engaging in sexist, racist and homophobic ‘banter’ usually through sport or heavy alcohol consumption.  The phrase ‘lad culture’ has become common place, especially in university campuses. This was highlighted in a 2012 study by the National Union of Students in which 50% of participants declared laddish behaviour and sexual violence to be a prevalent issue relating to university life.

But this phrase ‘lad culture’ is all too easily used to obscure terms like “misogyny”, “sexual harassment” and “abuse”, it’s a term that is allowing young men to get away with their actions by labelling them as normal. The jokes and degrading comments against women that it entails are the very reason the objectification of women is still so prolific in the UK. It leads to a normalisation of a mentality that allows women to be seen as merely objects of sexual desire.  It's part of a wider culture that teaches girls to be sexual in accordance to men's desires, but shames them if they explore their own sexuality. Most of all, it's a culture that belittles a woman's right to say no, her right to her own autonomy and privacy.

Unfortunately it is a culture that we see and experience on a daily basis. We run a feminist group in which young people between the ages of 11 and 18 discuss a variety of issues relating to gender equality and act as agents for change within the wider community. We have collated their views regarding the way in which lad culture affects their lives and we were shocked to find that even the youngest members of the group had experienced harassment of some form. It seems unacceptable to us that even at this young age, girls are being exposed to a world that tolerates such behaviour.

At home and even whilst in Brussels, we have been catcalled and harassed by groups of men. Yet when discussing these issues with our peers, we have been met with comments such as “Why are you being so uptight?” as though we should be flattered that we have received their attention. There is an expectation that we should take this behaviour as a joke and not condemn it for the abuse that it really is.

Our school’s termly social events are marred by the stories of 16 and 17 year old boys groping girls, targeting the most vulnerable students. Boys often seek out the drunkest or most isolated girls to “make a move on” and it is not uncommon for groups to establish competitions to see who can attract the highest number of or most sought-after girls.

‘Lad culture’ is also present in some of our workplaces, with young women being harassed at the bars and restaurants in which they work by groups of men. A number of our female friends have discussed this problem with their employers who claim that nothing can be done, for fear of losing customers and damaging business. It is shocking to us that business seems more important to some employers than fundamental women’s’ rights.

And these aren’t just one off cases at our school, this is a culture that has become ingrained in everyday lives across the UK. At UK universities the lad culture that we see at school seems to escalate rapidly. According to a survey carried out by the National Union of Students, two-thirds of students had heard rape or sexual assault jokes on campuses and a quarter of those polled had experienced unwelcome sexual advances.

The report highlights heavy alcohol consumption, laddish behaviour within sport and the use of social media to be particular areas in which lad culture is especially evident. It is all too easy for lad culture to manifest itself in the sporting community due to the pre-existing masculine hierarchies that exist within this sort of environment.

One participant of the survey related an incident in which she attended a ‘sports social’ and saw a member of the rugby team dressed in a vest reading ‘Campus Rapist’ on the front and ‘It’s not rape if you say surprise!’ on the back. Students who report such behaviour are often dismissed or feel unsupported, as their claims aren’t taken seriously. This issue is worsened by the fact that universities are outsourcing services such as security and student support to external providers.

Heavy alcohol consumption has been linked to ‘laddish’ masculinities, with male students, especially sports players, being perceived as the heaviest drinkers. There has been seen to be a strong correlation between heavy drinking and the sexual harassment and abuse of female students on evenings out and at social events.

Many survey participants identified that groping had become a normal part of going out. One interviewee said ‘many times I have been out and either been groped by groups of lads on a social or things like that, or actually insulted as I am not wearing ‘sexy enough’ clothes.’ It was even noted that nightclub promoters were major proponents of ‘lad culture’ through publicising cheap alcohol, the objectification of women and the promise of sexual activity in order to attract business from young men.

There were also numerous reports of misogynist jokes and ‘banter’ circulating in friendship groups which made female students feel uncomfortable. But these kind of derogatory exchanges don’t just take place face to face, the increased usage of social media has allowed many to use it as an additional platform to perpetuate their ‘lad culture’.

Websites such as Uni Lad and The Lad Bible target students as their primary audience, encouraging the judgement of women based on their physical appearance through the use of highly sexualised images and content. The use of the word banter, however, to define this is detrimental because it seeks to trivialise and normalise it, giving men an excuse with which to justify their behaviour.

Although the topic of lad culture may be seen as trivial by the majority of our peers, we believe that it can ultimately lead to a more serious problem, the normalisation of sexual violence and rape. Lad culture is built upon the premise of establishing power over others, especially women, and mirrors the dominance and submission that plays a key role in rape culture. The combination of the establishment of power and the trivialisation of sexual abuse that lad culture allows, is ultimately why it should never be seen as the joke that it is perceived to be. It was once said that “the standard you walk past is the standard you accept” and lad culture is allowing us to walk past and accept the widespread, horrific rape culture in the United Kingdom.

Lad culture and rape culture are so inextricably linked that by finding a solution to the issue of lad culture, we are able to start addressing rape culture. But what is already being done? Following the 2012 National Union of Students report, the government created a ‘lad culture’ task force in 2015 to specifically tackle concerns about violence towards women on UK university campuses. Sajid Javid, former UK Business Secretary said “This task force will ensure that universities have a plan to stamp out violence against women and provide a safe environment for all their students. We do not tolerate this behaviour in any part of society and I’m not prepared to let it take place on university campuses unchecked.”

But initiatives are also being taken at a more grass roots level; an Oxford based empowerment programme called the ‘Good Lad Workshop’ encourages men to become positive agents for change within their social circles by focusing on issues relating to consent, masculinity, peer pressure, power and responsibility. Instead of casting men as potential perpetrators who just have to learn to obey the law, they promote the idea of ‘positive masculinity’ which is crucial in allowing young men to still explore their masculine characteristics, yet in a way that is respective towards women.

However, is university too late to be educating men about these issues? Speaking to girls as young as 11 who have been victims of harassment has made us realise that education needs to start much earlier.  As a representative to the British Youth Council, I have been involved in their curriculum for life campaign, which aims to ensure that all secondary school aged pupils receive a high standard of citizenship education, encompassing finances, drugs, relationships and sex education.  Without such critical education, issues such as ‘lad culture’ will only escalate.

Taking our sixth form as an example, whilst the girls school have been taught about issues such as consent from the age of 13, the first time the neighbouring boys school were given the same lesson was when the majority were aged 17. Whilst this is shocking enough, many of the boys simply took it as a joke. If they had been taught about the importance of consent from a much earlier age would they have addressed this issue with the seriousness it deserves?

We have realised that the school curriculum isn’t currently tackling the issue of lad culture as it should, so we have taken matters into our own hands. As part of our work with NAWO Gloucestershire, we are creating a toolkit for students to set up their own feminist groups. This will include sample presentations, research materials and ideas for campaigns and charities to support. We believe that encouraging young people to come together to talk about gender equality will raise awareness of gender issues whilst giving young people the confidence to call out their friends and family if they hear everyday sexism, therefore creating a culture of tolerance and understanding rather than a ‘lad culture’.

The issue is that lad culture doesn’t allow rape culture to become an issue.

The issue is that it trivialises and undermines women’s right for their own bodily autonomy and equal status.

With nearly 70% of university students being a victim of one or more kinds of sexual harassment, it is impossible to continue considering ‘lad culture’ as simply just ‘banter’.

No other ‘banter’ contributes towards a society in which 11 adults are raped every hour, in which rape crisis helplines receive nearly 4,000 calls a week.

Now more than ever is the time to stand up and say that this is a culture that is no longer acceptable.