**Sexual harassment of female school staff**

UNISON Cymru Wales submission to Senedd Children, Young People and Education Committee inquiry, November 2022

**About UNISON Cymru Wales**

UNISON is the UK’s largest trade union organising and representing 1.3 million public sector workers UK wide, including 100,000 public sector workers across Wales.

Our members, 85 per cent of whom are women, work in the delivery of public services through direct public sector provision, private and voluntary contractors providing public services, and in the essential utilities. They include frontline staff and managers working full or part-time in public administration, local authorities, health and social care, the police and justice service, universities, colleges and schools, the electricity, gas, environment and water industries, transport, and in the voluntary and community sectors.

UNISON Cymru Wales represents thousands of school support staff including teaching and learning support assistants, reception and office staff, kitchen and catering staff, midday supervisors, caretakers, pastoral care, technicians and librarians. These school staff are predominantly female. This submission paper is shaped by their experience.

The issue of safety of school support staff and concerns about their security on school premises is very relevant. The Committee’s inquiry into sexual harassment of female staff sits alongside the work UNISON has been involved in on violence and aggression faced by teaching and classroom assistants in across the UK.

We also wanted to support the Committee’s investigations by providing detailed feedback on how support staff in Wales feel about these issues and surveyed our members in October.

**Summary of UNISON position**

School support staff are often referred to as ‘unsung heroes’ of our schools. They perform a vital role which makes our schools the success they are, but the majority are low-paid women who suffer an institutional discrimination that belittles their role. This can have a serious impact on how they feel about reporting incidences of violence and sexual harassment, how schools might treat such complaints from them and how these members of staff are supported.

The evidence we provide in this paper shows school support staff are overwhelming worried about violent behaviour in their job in schools (70% of respondents to our survey said they were worried about this). Staff are frequently verbally abused and violent incidents and injuries to staff are commonplace, yet staff do not feel supported by their headteachers and nor have many been given training on how to deal with violent situations.

While violent behaviour is an everyday occurrence across Welsh schools, support staff report a much lower incidence of sexual harassment in the workplace, though of course, it is no less serious. As we will detail later, 11% of school support staff respondents had experienced sexual harassment at work, the most common being verbal harassment followed by physical harassment. Of those who had suffered harassment, the perpetrator in the majority of cases was a pupil or learner.

School support staff suffering sexual harassment said they would feel much more confident about reporting this to their headteacher and more confident that it would be dealt with appropriately, than when a violent incident occurs.

The consequences of violent pupil behaviour can be grave for the mental and physical health of support staff. Many teaching assistants describe a feeling of dread of going into school each morning fearing they will be subject to violence and aggression. They might suffer panic attacks and many talk of being plagued by anxiety so much that it disturbs their sleep.

This worry is aggravated because they feel unsupported by headteachers and the general perception in school that violence is to be endured as a normal part of the working culture.

Anxiety is further compounded because support staff say many schools either don’t have protocols for dealing with aggressive children or don’t make support staff aware of them and don’t provide staff with training to de-escalate situations and protect themselves.

Schools must have robust policies around violence and sexual harassment of staff and make pupils and colleagues aware that this will not be tolerated in any way.

In particular, UNISON makes three urgent recommendations: improve the reporting process around attacks, provide staff with medical and psychological support and ensure they don’t have to continue working with the young person who’s just assaulted/harassed them.

**Role of teaching assistants**

Without doubt, schools could not survive without teaching assistants. They help to support Special Educational Needs children and those underperforming; help teachers to cope with big classes and release teachers for preparation time and help those with English as an Additional Language, amongst other things.

It is in the interests of schools therefore to prioritise the safety and well-being of school support staff as a way of guaranteeing their school is a high-performing one.

Most of the evidence gathered by UNISON was from teaching assistants and the frightening testimonies we hear from them in Wales every day, clearly shows that schools are not doing enough in this area. Teaching assistants are extremely worried about violent behaviour in their job.

**Academic report into the violence and aggression faced by teaching assistants in the UK**

UNISON at a UK level contributed to a recently published academic study by University of Roehampton criminologist, Dr Amanda Holt, into the violence and aggression faced by teaching and classroom assistants in Wales, England and Scotland – the first analysis of its kind (extensive data already exists into pupil-on-pupil violence and aggression towards teachers and senior managers.)

Dr Amanda Holt led the qualitative research that involved in-depth interviews with 16 teaching and classroom assistants. UNISON helped recruit the support staff who took part in the research.

All described being the target of student aggression in a range of ways, including being hit in the face, punched, kicked and bitten. Researchers found that in several cases staff reported receiving death threats from pupils. 53% of teaching assistants had experienced physical violence from students in the previous year.

Physical injuries included cuts, a black eye, a dislocated thumb, a broken finger and ripped ligaments. Staff also reported a range of psychological problems, including stress, anxiety and depression. Two workers were diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.

The report also noted that the response of schools to attacks was sometimes inadequate. Teaching assistants felt the message from their employers was that it was their job to manage pupil violence. This, combined with their low status, normalised violence against them*.*

The report includes guidance on the steps schools should take to better protect teaching assistants in future. UNISON is rolling out the new advice about dealing with violent behaviour.

Dr Holt said: “For the first time there’s an understanding of the ferocity of attacks on teaching assistants and their devastating physical and mental toll.

“This knowledge will help schools better understand and improve their response to violent behaviour by pupils. Setting out the steps every school should take to protect staff and support them in the aftermath of an attack is an important first step.

“This raises big questions about the expectation of schools, and in some cases insistence, that teaching assistants should be the first line of defence against pupils who display violent or aggressive behaviour.

“With the profession dominated by women, forcing them to become classroom enforcers could do long-term harm. Combined with the role’s lack of professional status, this risks creating an environment where violence becomes normal, particularly towards women. As pupils become adults this worrying development could have serious ramifications for society.”

The Holt report is submitted by UNISON alongside our evidence to the Committee.

**UNISON Cymru Wales survey of teaching assistants**

As the main trade union representing school support staff in Wales, we wanted to support the Committee’s investigations by providing detailed feedback on how support staff feel about these issues.

We launched a survey of UNISON school support staff on 18 October 2022 which closed on 27 October. 212 members, across primary, secondary and special schools, 3-16 learning community, pupil referral units, completed our survey. The overwhelming majority of respondents were teaching assistants.

The key findings are summarised below.

**Key survey data**

*Q1. Are you worried about violent behaviour in your job?*

* 70% (149 people) said ‘yes’

*Q2. How frequently have you personally experienced violence at work in the past 12 months?*

* 16.8% experience verbal abuse at least daily; 28.8% experience verbal abuse at least weekly
* 10.7% experience threats at least daily; 20.1% experience threats at least weekly
* 10.6% experience assaults at least daily; 15.2% experience assault at least weekly

*Q3. How often do you observe violent incidents towards staff in your school?*

* 70 people observe violent incidents at least daily
* 58 people observe violent incidents at least weekly

*Q4. If you have been assaulted, what behaviours did this include? Tick all that apply*

* Pushing – 105 people
* Kicking – 121 people
* Punching – 92
* Throwing of object/ furniture – 127 people
* Spitting – 84 people
* Biting – 80 people
* Scratching – 76 people
* Attacked with a weapon – 27 people
* Verbally – 117 people
* Other – 22 people

*Q5. Have you ever suffered an injury as a result of violence/physical abuse at your school?*

* 8% said ‘yes, major injury requiring medical assistance’
* 43% said ‘yes, minor injury requiring first aid’

*Q6. If you have experienced a violent incident, did you feel supported by your head teacher/line manager?*

* 41% said ‘no’

*Q7. Respondents were asked if violent behaviour from pupils had an impact on your health and wellbeing, in what ways? Only a sample is given below. Each bullet-point denotes a different respondent.*

* It caused me to have anxiety about going to work & also made my asthma a lot worse due to the stress & anxiety of being attacked every time I was in the class with the child to the point I had to take 6 weeks off work.
* *My confidence and self esteem has been effected, questioning if I am in some way doing something that is provoking behaviour*
* Just recently I had a table thrown at me, damaging my arm and resulting in so far three weeks off.
* *Working in a special needs school it comes with part of the job but I don’t feel there is enough support after incidents. Staff shortages and inexperienced staff cause behaviours to be worse. We are just expected to get on with it as it’s a part of the job without actual support and support of our wellbeing. I feel overworked, under paid and under appreciated.*
* Yes scared to work with individuals on a daily basis. Been put in the same class as an individual who has bitten, kicked pushed me.
* *I am very wary of children approaching me from behind and have become more nervous at home when family comes quietly near me*
* Drained, stressed, unable to complete daily tasks. Miserable in my role. On high alert constantly, waiting for next attack
* *Yes. Went in sick leave for six months. Couldn’t cope. Was going through a difficult time at home and then daily upset in work and felt like I wasn’t supported at all.*
* Don’t want to come to Work. Worry that if you speak up that they’ll listen and won’t react badly. Worry if you’ll be supported for telling pupils to stop.
* *It made me leave that school and job for something I didn't want to do. I hid in toilets as much as I could and became miserable at home which damaged my relationship with my partner*
* Absolutely it has, it has impacted both my health and wellbeing. I am currently still off work from my last attack and in awful pain. Dreams where I'm woken up by the pupil or can't sleep for it running through my mind.
* *Yes. Going to school every day feeling anxious in case a child becomes aggressive, physically or verbally abusive. Lack of acknowledgment or support from parents - denial of behaviours. TAs (Teaching Assistants) just being left to deal with poor behaviours.*
* Has encouraged me to look for employment outside of the education sector.
* *Yes. I have been attacked several times by ALN (Additional Learning Needs) students. One time was particularly bad and I had to go to A&E to get my nose and eye socket x-rayed.*
* Made me feel inadequate and no good at my job. Dreaded going into work, also felt I was failing the pupil involved and the other pupils in the class.
* *I would come home after work and take my frustration out on my children. Shouting at them for silly things, having no tolerance towards them etc.*
* Yes, started having panic attacks and unable to sleep
* *Feeling tired, no energy to complete family activities, having to hide marks & bruises from husband & own children*
* Yes, in the last year I have had panic attacks, I have also been having chest pains and other symptoms, which medical professionals have told me is likely due to the stressful nature of my job. This term I often feel anxious and I am losing weight as I have lost my appetite.
* *Yes I ended up in A&E twice! Once with a facial injury that needed treatment. Multiple permanent scars from being bitten and scratched, It left me feeling nervous about coming to work and had a negative effect on my wellbeing, I was left feeling stressed and anxious daily.*
* Yes, I feel like a sitting duck in my school because assaults/threats towards support staff are often turned back on us by SMT (Senior Management Team) and we are made to feel it is our fault even though there are no clear policies and procedures we can refer to of what to do when such serious incidents occur such as when a pupil is in possession of a weapon. I personally have been reprimanded by SMT recently for asking an open question to colleagues as to why wasn't a pupil dealt with in a particular way when in possession of a weapon being unaware at the time of the actual procedure.
* *I don't go to work to be a battering ram for a child to kick and lash out at and keep getting told that tomorrow is another day. It brings in anxiety and a feeling of not wanting to go to work*
* Yes it made me dread going to work and fear serious injury
* *Yes. We are seeing staff hit, kicked, elbowed, pushed sometimes deliberately, sometimes when breaking up fights but it's becoming so regular you can't help but worry. Starting to not feel safe there anymore and this is a standard comp, not a special school or PRU (Pupil Referral Unit).*

*Q8. Is there a clear protocol at your school for reporting a violent incident towards staff?*

* 16% said ‘no’
* 21% said ‘don’t know’

*Q9. Have you seen a risk assessment or behaviour plan for any of the learners you work with where this is required?*

* 48% said ‘no’

*Q10. Is the risk assessment/behaviour plan updated following an incident?*

* 11% said ‘no’
* 49% said ‘don’t know’

*Q11. Does your school have policies, risk assessments and control measures in place?*

* 5% said ‘no’
* 33% said ‘don’t know’

*Q12. Have you been given training on how to deal with violent situations?*

* 46% said ‘no’

*Q13. Respondents were given the opportunity to describe measures that their school has taken to deal with violence in their workplace. Only a sample is given below. Each bullet-point denotes a different respondent.*

* Tried to exclude pupils but LEA (Local Education Authority) made school have them back
* *“It’s part of the job”*
* There are policies and measures in place, but the headteacher does not follow them so the whole process does not work. It is only when the headteacher is on the receiving end that they do anything about it. Support staff are not considered at all.
* *Referred child to educational psychologist.*
* Since I and another colleague have been signed off sick by Dr we have been made aware of violence policies and violence at work forms
* *Pupil was removed for a time period but has returned, behaviour is still a problem.*
* Some avoidance tactics that rarely work.
* *Yes. Reported to Behaviour Support but there is rarely any assistance available*
* Photos of injuries are sent to county as far as I know!
* *Yes, told to ignore behaviour and use team teach to prevent attacks. However, this is almost impossible due to the speed of the children and violent behaviour towards us.*
* No, other than discussing it. Such discussions imply that we must ‘just get on with it’.
* *We have received Team Teach training which focused on how to safely remove a pupil from a situation, but I do not feel that is enough to help us in knowing how to deescalate situations or cope with the physical harm and emotional stress these instances cause to staff.*
* Exclusions - however staff have dealt with way too many incidents before this happens and then children are being allowed back, leaving staff feeling scared of a recurrence. Staff are being physically and verbally abused on an hourly basis, daily - behaviour has a significant negative affect on the learning of the rest of the children who aren’t getting an education they deserve as a result.
* *Most children have individual plans, with positive handling protocols and triggers/diffusers etc. However not all staff are given these documents.*
* No. Staff don't feel enough is done, regularly there are incidents that staff feel warrant permanent exclusion but the council/challenge adviser apparently make this incredibly difficult. We'll be a news story before long, knives will be next but sadly until something truly awful and "newsworthy" occurs we're just expected to carry on.

*Q14. Respondents were asked what else could be done to tackle the problem of violence against staff in their school and to make staff feel better supported? Only a sample is given below. Each bullet-point denotes a different respondent.*

* Tougher sanctions against perpetrators
* *Give clear consequences, helping by removing the child from the situation so that staff that have been shown violence don’t have to work with the child again straight after the incident. Quicker referrals & diagnosis, more staff to share to load & teachers stepping in to help instead of leaving low paid TAs to be punching bags. Not expecting TAs to do break and lunch duty with the child all the time as this feels isolating & you don’t have time to debrief or seek emotional support & reassurance from other staff.*
* More support for staff’s well-being. Better communication between all staff following an incident & for it to be constant across the school. Better support for special support officers who are with the pupils every moment of the day apart from 30 minute break
* *To have an experienced staff team with the most challenging pupils.*
* Giving us a good amount of trained staff and a good line manager and better pay
* *To know that the child and parents will be dealt with appropriately instead of going for a cup of tea and a break from class with the head then returned to class half hour later.*
* Time for staff to recover after an assault, rather than made to go straight back to pupil with no consequence for child. Parents made aware of violent attacks, consider what other provisions are needed for violent children.
* *Being able to talk openly about it with a line manager and a plan put into place to help cope with these situations*
* Appropriate training. A clear plan of how certain young people are to be managed so that all members of staff are on the same page. Regular check in meetings with line managers to express staff concerns. To be listened to and out feelings and thoughts to be taken notice of.
* *More staff employed and more assistance from the LA*
* More training and specialist senior management responsibilities, as it often feels that TA’s (the poorest paid) are left to deal with issues. It’s understandable that teachers have to remain in class as there is often a full class of children that need supervision and sometimes maybe upset too, however there needs to be a designated, specialist trained member of senior management available at all times, who is called upon as a matter of standard policy (as this takes the responsibility to make that call off TA’s) when a pupil is behaving violently.
* *More and more children are being refused 1:1 support in school when they clearly need it. I believe that this would greatly decrease the amount of violent situations as there would be a designated person for the child who would be able to intervene and potentially stop the situation from escalating*
* There should be a clear plan in place for behaviour and it should be followed consistently for every child and for every member of staff abused, staff should also be listened to, we should have the right to go to work and not be stressed about what we are going to have to face. My setting is mainstream but our SLT (Senior Leadership Team) seem to think that if a child is ALN or has an autism diagnosis that it is okay for them to attack you and you shouldn’t complain as it is your job.
* *More consequences for violence, suitable staffing levels*
* There is a need for more funding or staff to work with children who require such support. Currently, teachers and support staff are constantly supporting these children on a daily basis alongside the class. Where most situations, 2 members of staff are required to help regulate and support children. This leaves the other children without the support they need, resulting in many cancelled interventions, lesson activities and daily support. Also the staff members are drained from the daily (in our case) behaviours.
* *There needs to be more TAs for support. We deserve better pay. The risks and demands do not fit the pay we get.*
* To be included in the process moving forward and be updated on any reports that are submitted. Head teacher at times does nothing.

*Q15. Have you ever experienced sexual harassment at work?   
“Sexual harassment, as defined by the Equality Act 2010, is when a person engages in unwanted behaviour of a sexual nature, whether verbal, non-verbal or physical, that creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive working environment.”*

* 87% said ‘no’ (184 people)
* 11% said ‘yes’ (24 people)
* 1% said ‘don’t know’ (3 people)

*Q16. What form of sexual harassment have you experienced at work? Please tick all that apply*

* Physical (for example unwelcome touching, hugging, invasion of personal space) – 11 people
* Verbal (for example inappropriate jokes, comments about your appearance, invitations on a data, questions about your private life) – 19 people
* Visual (for example, sexual gestures, staring, winking) – 6 people
* Sexual assault (for example unwanted kissing, sexual touching, performing a sexual act) – 2 people
* Cyber (for example inappropriate emails, texts or phone calls) – 2 people

*Q18. When was the last time you experienced sexual harassment at work?*

* 31% of those who had experienced sexual harassment said ‘in the last month’
* 8% of those who had experienced sexual harassment said ‘in the last school term’

*Q19. Who was the perpetrator of the sexual harassment at work?*

* 18 people said pupil or learner
* 6 people said a colleague
* 3 people said a manager or supervisor

*Q20. Did you report the sexual harassment to your employer or to another body?*

* 69% said ‘yes’
* 31% said ‘no’

*Q21. Was this appropriately dealt with?*

* 72% said ‘yes’
* 28% said ‘no’

*Q22. Have you ever witnessed a colleague being sexually harassed at work?*

* 15% said ‘yes’
* 3% said ‘don’t know’

*Q23. If you were sexually harassed at work in the future, would you feel confident reporting it to your employer?*

* 14% said ‘no’
* 19% said ‘don’t know’