

On Wednesday, March 9, a group of male students gathered outside of the fitness center housing South's newly-formed Girls Only Lift WIN block. Almost instantaneously, an explosion of social media outrage criticizing the male students' actions and the school's response spread through South students' Instagram pages.

Within days, students labeled the male students' actions as sexual harassment. Two ninth grade students soon organized a walkout to bring attention to greater sexual harassment culture within Newton.

On social media, several posts regarding the incident involving the Girls Only Lift alluded to a broader cultural tolerance for sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination that some students feel has left such issues relatively unaddressed and uncommunicated.

Yet elaborate laws and regulations, like Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, often dictate the administrative processes, ability to share information more broadly and a timeline for response, which can potentially create perceived inaction amongst students.

Setting the Scene

According to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC), 56% of high school-aged girls and 40% of boys have experienced any kind of sexual harassment. However, the American Association of University Women (AAUW) reports that 79% of schools containing grades seven through 12 have reported no incidents of sexual harassment, a figure that the AAUW said is mainly due to an underreporting of incidents.

While such figures reflect the national scope of sexual harassment within public education, English teacher Jenny Robertson said that the issue is also present at South.

"There have been some unaddressed and problematic behaviors in the school for a long time," she said. "That's the culture, and that's what we need to change."

English teacher and '07 South graduate Deborah Bernhard, said that when she attended South, her peers perceived the Senior Commons and gym as traditionally masculine spaces with little room for female involvement or presence, a culture she said is still prevalent.

History teacher and '12 North graduate Lillian Robinson said that she sees sexism in the classroom, but that addressing sexist comments can lead to adverse responses from students.

"I feel like I hear a lot of misogynistic comments, a lot of misogynistic attitudes," Robinson said. "And I try to correct

them in a way that people will not get annoyed with me, but I feel like it's still an issue... I've seen the changes, but also feel like we still have a long way to go."

Junior Mitchy Bojar said that generally, sexual harassment is a regular part of the culture at South, so those affected don't tend to report such incidents.

"I think sexual harassment is way too normalized at South," they said. "I know so many people, pretty much all non-men, who have experienced some form of sexual harassment but have never said anything because it's just something that happens to everyone and it feels overwhelming taking action. Additionally, it feels like there are never any consequences so it feels like it's not worth the trouble."

In athletics, even within girls teams, some female athletes feel uncomfortable. Junior and girls volleyball player Tia Russell said her volleyball uniform consists of close-fitting jerseys and skin-tight shorts, which makes her feel subject to sexualization and harassment during her games.

"I feel like most of the boys who come to watch volleyball have been so tainted by the idea that volleyball is about the tight clothing that they really just come 40% for the game, 60% for the ass," she said. "As a tall woman, I think men tend to stay away from me because they think I can fight them off, but girls who are smaller than me or skinnier than me have a higher chance of getting harassed because they don't look strong."

Bojar also said that there is a noticeable difference of power dynamics between the girls and boys team, affecting the way they interact.

"As an athlete, I feel like the women on those teams are never as respected," they said. "The boys teams always feel so comfortable taking space away from women and never seem to care or acknowledge what they're doing."

Senior Sydرا Shapiro, who addressed the weight-lifting incident in an Instagram post that received over 5,000 interactions, said that the source of the issue is bigger and more difficult to combat than some may think.

"It's a multi-layered problem, because you have these immediate, more urgent issues... that we have to deal with because if safety is being threatened, then that's the first thing we deal with," she said. "But this [is a] much deeper issue deeply rooted in something that none of us really can touch, or at least we haven't been able to yet."

History teacher Jessica Engel said that the presence of sexual harassment and sexism is vast because of its pervasiveness.

"Schools and all institutions are reflections of our society," she said. "We live in a sexist society, so of course there's sexism in South."

Tackling the Dilemma

Responding to allegations of gender inequality and sexual harassment is often much more complex and procedural than it may appear on the surface.

Cutler House Dean Josephine Blocker said that when students submit allegations of sexual or gender-based harassment or discrimination, they must be guided through their Title IX rights and make a decision as to whether they wish for their claims to be pursued under the Newton Public Schools (NPS) Harassment, Discrimination and Retaliation Protocol or under Title IX. She said that such decisions often extend investigations due to their complexity, and consequently, may prolong any community communication.

South initially addresses allegations of sexism or gender-based discrimination no differently than they do other claims of hate: with an appropriate investigation, Goldrick House Dean Marc Banks said.

"We take all claims of harassment, discrimination and retaliation seriously at South, and use the district's protocol to respond thoroughly," he said.

Claims of sexual harassment, however, navigate a notably more difficult process than other issues of discrimination or prejudice. While the school can often handle allegations of racism or antisemitism itself, which allows administrators a large amount of agency in their investigation to determine consequences, gender-based discrimination claims are often

governed by a larger array of rules and procedures.

When students file reports of sexual harassment or discrimination, the investigation may operate under federal guidelines instead, affecting the administrative response. Chief among the federal guidelines is Title IX, a law passed in 1972 to ban sex-based discrimination in any school receiving federal funding, an umbrella that South, a public school, falls under.

Since its passage, Title IX has played a crucial role in national efforts to address gender-based discrimination within schools. History teacher and co-chair of the South Human Rights Council Robert Parlin said that Title IX is critical in combatting the cultures of sexual harassment and overall gender discrimination that can ferment within high schools across the country.

"It is an amazing law. It's fantastic because it forces schools to recognize how sexist things are and particularly to give equal educational opportunities," he said. "It's been great where it's been used effectively. It's been fantastic for gender equity and safety."

However, the complexity of Title IX regulations often forces administrators to navigate a more rigid and intricate set of rules in their response than they would for most other issues, thus prolonging investigations.

"The one thing I would say is a difference [between sexual harassment investigations and others] is that Title IX provides an additional layer to the investigative process that sometimes slows us down," Blocker said.

Investigating claims of sexual harassment depends on students' [and their families] decision of whether to follow federal or district action, which Blocker said complicates the process.

"It may feel to some folks like it takes longer when [claims fall under] sexual harassment, but it's really not that we're moving slowly," she said. "It's that we're trying to provide people rights, and that process can be a lot longer until we get clarity on what to do and how to do it."

While the school has organized speaker panels and mandated class discussion in response to other hate-related incidents, Shapiro said that South simply does not grant as much attention to sexism as other issues.

"This was something that happened right under our noses, and we knew and nothing happened," she said. "No one did anything, and the administration didn't respond even though they knew about it. They didn't validate it, and that way, they didn't give it the acknowledgement and validation it deserved."

However, Krishnamoorthy said that the challenge within the handling allegations of sexual harassment is the behind the scenes nature of the process.

"It's more of a governmental issue because the way in which you solve these issues isn't by keeping everything secretive," she said. "If the students don't actually understand what's happening, then you don't prevent something from happening in the future, and if you don't actually understand the legal process in which the school deals with these cases, not only are the students unable to voice how they think we could make the process better [but] also voice how they can feel safer."

Principal Tamara Stras said that revealing more about the cases would not only potentially violate student privacy, but also indirectly hurt those who have been affected by similar issues in the past.

"There are so many things that I have to keep confidential on different levels... but those are things that I am privy to, and it's my duty to protect people from that," she said. "A lot of people don't see it that way because they believe information is power, but when we come to this idea of re-traumatizing people, that's when people realize maybe information is not power because it's bringing something up that they don't necessarily want it to."

South deans and Stras emphasized that the disclosure of information for allegations of sexual harassment is determined by those affected and the legal courses they wish to pursue.

"There will always be an imbalance between the information that we're allowed to put out and what is actually happening, but it's nothing that the deans can fix because the law says that it is this way," Banks said. "It's frustrating because I worry sometimes that in the absence of information, people assume nothing is happening; meanwhile, there is a lot that is going on, it's just that we can't talk about it."

Similarly, Stras said that a lack of student body knowledge about incident specifics is simply the reality of the situation.

"People need to learn to get comfortable with knowing that they're not going to know everything," she said. "And they're going to have to be okay with that."

A

Balancing Act

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Amidst a reckoning around sexual harassment, South works to protect the victims while managing community perceptions