

**ARTICLE**

# Spaces of change: Everyday gender activism through near-peer gender and sexuality workshops with young people in the UK

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**Abstract**

This paper explores ‘near-peer’ gender and sexuality workshops taking place in UK secondary schools in support of the nationally required relationships and sex education curriculum. In line with UK law, these workshops promote respect, kindness and communication in a framework that explicitly validates LGBTQI+ identities, relationships and family structures. Based on interviews with 24 gender workshop facilitators, we explore the kind of practices that are needed to create spaces in which young people can openly reflect on their views about gender and sexuality, and advance the above-noted goals of promoting respect, kindness and empathy for people of all genders and sexualities. We argue that gender workshops constitute an important and under-explored space of ‘everyday’ activism. We further argue that through practices of atmosphere curation and the near-peer relational dynamic between facilitators and participants, these workshops create valuable spaces for young people to critically reflect on their views and attitudes about gender and sexuality in a way that does not exist elsewhere. This work extends understanding about the kinds of spatial practices that might be needed to bring forth more positive gender cultures, and deepens our understanding about the experiences and functioning of ‘everyday’ work for social change that takes place outside of ‘high profile’ activist sites such as marches, demonstrations and protests.

**KEYWORDS**

affective atmospheres, everyday activism, near-peer workshops with young people, spaces of gender activism

it’s a real culture change, isn’t it?

(Nadine, workshop facilitator)

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

This paper helps advance understanding about the kinds of spaces needed to combat sexism, homo-, bi- and transphobia in the UK. We submit that one important means of bringing forth more positive gender cultures is the creation of spaces in which young people can discuss and explore concepts of gender and sexuality in a safe environment. We approach this issue through an investigation of gender workshops being given in UK secondary schools in support of the relationships and sex education curriculum, and suggest that these workshops constitute such spaces. Conceptually we situate this investigation within scholarship on the kinds of spaces needed to generate social change, extending scholarship on the spatialities and spatial practices of social activism. While this scholarship often focuses on ‘high profile’ spaces of protests, marches and demonstrations (Bond et al., 2020; Bosco, 2007; Herbert, 2007; Mitchell & Staeheli, 2005; Wright, 2004), we build on Chatterton and Pickerill’s call for the need to also attend to ‘quieter’, more everyday spaces and forms of activism (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010). We build on Chatterton and Pickerill’s work on the lived practices of everyday activism by exploring how ‘everyday practices are used as building blocks to construct a hoped-for future’ (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010, p. 476), extending existing scholarship by exploring the gender activism taking place within everyday spaces of UK secondary schools. We suggest that gender workshops constitute an important and underexplored space of everyday gender activism, and argue that through practices of atmosphere curation and the near-peer relational dynamic they create spaces in which young people can critically examine their views on gender and sexuality and come to greater understanding and empathy for those of other genders and sexual orientations.

Issues of misogyny, homo, bi- and transphobia have risen in public awareness in recent years in the UK, as they have in many places. Building on increased awareness about sexual harassment and other forms of gender violence raised through the global #MeToo campaign, the rape and murder of Sarah Everard by an acting British Police officer and the murder of London schoolteacher Sabina Nessa in 2021 has kept the issue of gender violence in the public eye. The ‘Everyone’s Invited’ initiative (started in 2020) has drawn attention to the issue of sexual harassment faced by UK school children and research has highlighted the negative mental health effects of homo, bi- and transphobia for young people in particular (Ventriglio et al., 2021; <https://www.beyondblue.org> [Accessed 6th March 2023]; [everyonesinvited.uk](http://everyonesinvited.uk)).

Tracking alongside these events, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) was made a mandatory feature of England’s secondary school curriculum in 2020. Education constitutes a powerful mechanism through which national values and norms of citizenship—including as relating to gender and sexuality—are (re)produced (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2019; Nash & Browne, 2021). In turn, curricula change over time as cultural values shift and in response to different forms of citizen advocacy (Nash & Browne, 2021). While the changes in the 2020 RSE guidance ‘pulled through’ the codification of equal rights for all UK citizens regardless of gender, sexual orientation or gender identity as guaranteed by the Equality Act of 2010, the values in this Act are not all endorsed in their entirety by the whole of UK society. In addition to the above-noted all too visible evidence of ongoing misogyny in the UK, the proportion of Britons who support same-sex relationships fell in 2018 for the first time since the 1980s (Booth, 2019); and Nash and Browne have drawn attention to the increasingly organised groups of ‘heteroactivists’ which have formed in the UK and elsewhere in recent years (Nash & Browne, 2021). As Nash and Browne note:

Despite the advent of same-sex marriage and related LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans) equalities in Canada and the UK, contestations regarding gender and sexual rights have not dissipated. As LGBT people are integrated into the fabric of state institutions and everyday life, opposition is growing in public and private spheres.

(Nash & Browne, 2021, p. 75)

As far as attitudes of young Britons are concerned, research presents a mixed story. While many young people embrace concepts of gender diversity and gender equality, issues of homo- or transphobia, sexual harassment and pressure to ‘prove’ or perform one’s heterosexuality and cis-gender status within and beyond school space persist (Allen et al., 2021; Bragg et al., 2018; Hall, 2020). As Allen and colleagues have shown, although young people in the UK report high levels of acceptance of gender diversity (in contrast to what they see as more conservative views of older citizens), there can also be confusion about what gender diversity means and higher levels of tolerance for ‘fixed’ or binary trans identities than fluid or multiple gender identities within a single person (Allen et al., 2021). Hall notes that while equality and respect for all may have been enshrined in UK law for at least 10 years, these values may not chime with the day-to-day lived reality of young people within or beyond school space, where homo- and transphobia may still be found (Hall, 2020). Meanwhile, research shows UK students in both rural and urban areas

across different parts of the country wishing there were higher levels of acceptance for gender diversity, and wanting more time to explore issues of gender and sexuality in school (Bragg et al., 2018).

Building on core themes of respect, tolerance and consent, the statutory guidance for the 2020 RSE policy seeks to make some of the goals of the Equality Act more explicit, noting that instruction should focus on the 'deliberate cultivation of ... kindness and a sense of justice' (p. 20), and calling for the critical exploration of 'how stereotypes based on sex, gender (and) sexual orientation can cause damage' (p. 28).<sup>1</sup> Building on the Equality Act which forbids discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity, the guidance also stipulates that 'sexual orientation and gender identity should be explored at a timely point and in a clear, sensitive and respectful manner', going on to note that 'there should be an equal opportunity to explore the features of stable and healthy same-sex relationships' (ibid, p. 26). This marks a significant shift from the policy that had been in place until 2003 in the UK which forbade any school receiving government funding to present homosexuality as an 'acceptable family relationship' under a provision of the Local Government Act of 1988 (section 28).<sup>2</sup> For background, Sex and Relationships Education began to be taught in 1999 in the UK within the broader curriculum envelope of Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE); however, in 2008 a government review characterised this provision as 'patchy' (<https://www.bigtalkeducation.co.uk> [Accessed 28th February 2023]).<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless the first two decades of the new millennium saw a series of campaigns to make RSE statutory (<https://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk> [Accessed 28th February 2023]; <https://www.bigtalkeducation.co.uk> [Accessed 28th February 2023]).<sup>3,4</sup> The drive to address consent, respect and power in relationships and make this a mandatory component of the national curriculum was given a strong push in 2015 when a government report found there to have been over 5500 sex crimes reported in schools in the previous 3 years in the UK (Savage, 2015). RSE was finally made a statutory part of the curriculum in England in 2020.

While some argue this policy marks what could be considered a 'queering' of sex education (Carrera-Fernández et al., 2021), others have pointed out ways it could have gone further. For example, Mo Wiltshire, director of education for LGBTQI+ charity Stonewall, noted:

While the introduction of statutory relationships and sex education in England's schools is a big step forward, we're concerned the UK government's new guidance for the subject falls short in equipping teachers to deliver high-quality and timely LGBT-inclusive education.

(as quoted in Mohdin, 2020)

A specific concern was expressed that the guidance outlines what teachers should not say in discussing trans identities without providing guidance on positive ways of discussing this. While it may not be a magic bullet, we nevertheless suggest the 2020 RSE guidance represents an opportunity to combat misogyny, trans-, homo- and bi-phobia at a society-wide scale.

For many schools, meeting the remit of this expanded format RSE has meant changing what they had been doing previously. While some schools are able to deliver high-quality RSE education that meets the new guidelines through their existing teaching staff, others deliver it through workshops delivered by young (typically 19–24 year old) volunteers trained by a selection of charities devoted to the improvement of sex education. This paper is based on a collaborative research project between an academic and two workshop facilitators that entailed interviewing 24 workshop facilitators in 2020 and 2021. After situating this research within the relevant scholarship, we will introduce the broader project on which this paper is based. We will then discuss our findings, arguing that these workshops constitute an important form of 'everyday' gender activism, creating space for the cultivation of more respectful and empathetic understandings of those of other genders and sexual orientations. We argue that they function through practices of atmosphere curation and the cultivation of empathy; and that they can be understood as a form of world-making. We then conclude by flagging up directions for further research.

## 2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptually this paper sits at the intersection of feminist geography and geographies of sexuality; geographies of education and geographies of activism; extending understanding about the lived and spatial practices of feminist activism. Activism and activist-engaged scholarship have been core features of feminist geography from the beginning. As Wright has observed:

across the diversity of feminist geography, a commitment to exploring activism as both a part of the research process and within the institutional circuits of the academy is long-standing.

(Wright, 2008, p. 379)

Wright further observes, this work has long emphasised the importance of attending to grounded, real-world struggles, and working collaboratively with those working for social change: in other words, approaching ‘activism as practice in dialogue with practitioners’ (Wright, 2008, p. 380).

While a complete review of this scholarship is beyond the scope of this paper, examples include Pulido and De Lara’s work on feminist activism within Latinx, African-American and Asian community groups in Los Angeles (Pulido, 2006; Pulido & De Lara, 2018); Gilmore’s work with mother-activists in their resistance against the racialised injustices of the US prison system (Gilmore, 2007); Fluri and Lehr’s work with feminist activists in Afghanistan (Fluri & Lehr, 2019); and Nagar and Datta’s work on feminist activism in India (Datta, 2007; Nagar, 2010); as well as Wright’s own work on mother-activism against femicide in Mexico (Wright, 2004, 2010), amongst others. Relatedly, this research also builds on geography scholarship on LGBTQI+ activism in terms of efforts to claim urban space and AIDS activism (Brown, 1997; Davis, 1995; Knopp, 1987). While these activism take myriad different forms, they are unified in their goal to fight oppression produced by the hetero-patriarchy. Building on this rich scholarship, we frame the activity considered here as *gender activism* because it seeks to change young people’s attitudes about gender diversity and gender equality.

This work also touches on geography scholarship on spaces of education, including how young people experience educational environments (Holloway et al., 2010; Holt et al., 2017; Kraftl, 2015); ways in which schools can be an important space for the production of gender norms (Hall, 2020; Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2019; Nash & Browne, 2021); and, as noted, as a space of resistance to efforts to *challenge* those norms in the case of parental resistance against LGBTQI+ inclusive curricula (Nash & Browne, 2021). Yet while taking place within the physical space of schools, because they are not delivered by ‘day to day teachers’, and is explicitly aimed at bringing about culture change, we argue that gender workshops have as many if not more resonances with activism as they do with teaching.

After Chatterton and Pickerill in their work on anti-capitalist activism, we approach gender workshops as political work aimed at ‘build (ing) a better world’ through everyday spaces and practices (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010, p. 481), as opposed to through higher-profile but episodic events such as protests, marches or sit-ins. Following their lead, we take a post-structuralist approach to activist subjectivities in which we reject a rigid ‘activist’/‘non-activist’ divide. Instead, we approach activism as a doing on the part of individuals who may or may not view the work they do as activism (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010, p. 480). We further follow Chatterton and Pickerill’s call to explore ‘the *spatialities* of political activism’, and particularly the concept of atmosphere curation as a mechanism of culture change (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010, p. 483), for which we also draw on the work of Anderson (2009) and Duff (2010) on the relations between affects, emotions and atmospheres in the processes by which places come to have meaning.

Relatedly, this research is also situated within the broader field of scholarship that has explored the role of emotions and emotion work in political activism (Bond et al., 2020; Bosco, 2007; Brown & Pickerill, 2009; Duncombe, 2007; Juris, 2008; Pulido, 2006; Wright, 2010). This work has explored the emotional drivers for undertaking activism; the emotional bonds between activists; the emotions raised by protests and other forms of direct action; and the elicitation of particular emotions in the service of driving social change. Within this, we build on arguments made by Bond et al. (2020) and Brown and Pickerill (2009) about the role of emotion management within activism as a means of changing people’s views, and the emotion work involved in making people begin to *see* and *care about* an issue by which they may not feel directly affected, which Bond and colleagues cast as the strategic cultivation of empathy (Bond et al., 2020). Drawing on this work, we explore how gender workshops get (young) people to care about misogyny, homo-, bi- and transphobia by creating spaces in which emotional vulnerability and critical self-reflection are possible.

This work also builds on scholarship in and beyond Geography on classrooms as spaces to explore and challenge hetero-patriarchal social structures and gender norms. This scholarship has considered a wide range of learning environments from university down to primary school. At the university level, work has explored both ‘bystander’ programmes focused on combating gender-based violence as well as the cultivation of feminist activism in higher education settings (Fenton & Mott, 2018; Lewis et al., 2018; Lewis & Marine, 2018). At the secondary school level, in a series of inter-related projects, Bragg and colleagues have explored how young people in middle childhood (approximately 12–14 years) understand concepts of gender (Bragg et al., 2018). Through this research they found instances of high levels of self-directed learning about gender and feminist theory from social media sites, as well as high levels of awareness and understanding about gender diversity, even as schools (typically) reinforce gender binaries through binary bathrooms, school uniforms

and binarised physical education programmes (Bragg et al., 2018). Relatedly, Renold has led a range of collaborative arts-based feminist activist projects aimed at generating more positive gender cultures amongst school children in Wales (Renold, 2019); while Ringrose and colleagues have investigated how school children experience digital sexism, and developed a programme to promote digital feminist activism in two UK schools that can be delivered as part of the RSE curriculum (Ringrose et al., 2021).

At the primary school level, Hall has shown how gender norms can manifest differently in different parts of schools (Hall, 2020). While in classroom space, children tend to subscribe to liberal values of diversity and acceptance of gender difference as taught in key stage 1 and 2, homophobia and cis-genderism can still live on in less 'public'/less adult-monitored spaces such as playgrounds and bathrooms (Hall, 2020).<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile Bonner-Thompson and Nayak have investigated how young people's understandings of masculinity and male caring can be explored in school settings through their work in arts-based ethnography with 9 and 10 year olds in an economically disadvantaged former ship-building community in Northern England. Through a school-based project with five classes, they have explored how awareness of and appreciation for caring masculinities might be cultivated through arts-based activity in which young people create artwork about their visions of different kinds of male caring (Bonner-Thompson & Nayak, 2021). This research has also explored pupils' views about masculinity, gender identity and sexual orientation, finding views that ranged from rights-based 'we're all the same' narratives that flattened difference; to attempts to queer or discard binary gender difference all together; as well as echos or long shadows of 'traditional' understandings of working-class masculinity based in physical and emotional 'hardness' (Nayak & Bonner-Thompson, 2022). This body of work has produced a nuanced and conceptually rich framework through which to consider school space as a domain in which to challenge hetero-patriarchal norms and practices. Our work builds on existing scholarship by offering what is to our knowledge one of the first theorisations of the myriad gender workshops now proliferating across England as schools seek to meet the 2020 RSE guidance.

### 3 | OVERVIEW OF PROJECT AND METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on data produced for a collaborative research project with gender workshop facilitators in the UK, undertaken between an academic and two workshop facilitators in 2020 and 2021. It draws on 24 interviews with secondary school workshop facilitators in the Southwest of England and Wales. This was part of a broader study of 40 interviews with facilitators working in both secondary schools and at the university level, 30 of which were undertaken by Boyer (the academic) and 10 by the two workshop facilitators Isabelle Wood and Lucy Willis who were also both in medical school at the time of the project (and one of whom went on to work on the development of this paper). The project was enabled by a seed-corn grant from Cardiff University and all interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed. Although some of the first interviews were face to face, because of the timing of the project over the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority were undertaken by zoom. Interviews ranged in length from 40 min to an hour and 45 min.

About three-quarters of the workshop facilitators identified as female, a quarter as male and one as non-binary. Just over half identified as non-heterosexual and 87% were white British, echoing the national demographic profile of the UK (<https://www.diversityuk.org> [Accessed 5th January 2022]).<sup>6</sup> Three-quarters of the sample described themselves as having come from a working class background and one-quarter described themselves as coming from middle or upper middle class background. All were between 20 and 25 years old and all were either currently in university or recently graduated. Most attended 'red brick' universities (referring to institutions which are older and more established), but some attended newer ('post 1960s') universities which are typically more diverse and have a higher proportion of students who are the first in their families to attend university.

The project received ethical approval from Cardiff University. According to these guidelines, all names have been changed to protect anonymity and the organisations through which they delivered workshops have also been anonymised. Interviewees were told what the interview would cover in advance and that they could take breaks or end the interview at any time. Boyer and Wood read all the interview transcripts and discussed together what we felt the key themes and findings were, identifying key patterns and trends in relation to the literature. Our analysis was informed by a post-structuralist, critical feminist approach to talk data in which research participants construct the meanings of their experiences within multiple, intersecting relations of social power (such as gender, race and class); and which recognises research as a reflective and collaborative process between researchers and research participants (Gill, 1996). In this light we note that this project (and the sense we made of the data) is shaped by our respective social locations (and privileges)

as white, middle class, cis-gender women, in our 50s and 20s, straight and queer respectively, in or in training for professional jobs.

Gender and sexuality workshops are offered by a range of service providers in the UK. Most are provided on a volunteer basis under the auspices of one of several sex education charities which train and support workshop facilitators, and some are delivered on a paid basis (typically on a sliding fee scale) by self-employed service providers (who have often come through one of the sex education charities' programmes). Our sample included facilitators from both types of backgrounds. Sex education charities predate the above-noted 2020 RSE legislation and are dedicated to the expansion and improvement of sex education in the UK. They are based on the belief that it is important for schools to provide time and space for frank discussion of sex and gender, and that near-peer sex and gender workshops given by trained facilitators in their early 20s can positively support school-based RSE. The schools in which facilitators in our study worked ranged from independent (fee-paying) single-sex and mixed schools to comprehensive schools ('free'/funded by city councils) and schools catering to students with social, emotional and mental health difficulties.

Training to become a workshop facilitator typically entailed a day-long session that included discussing mission and objectives, the importance of inclusivity and information on safeguarding. The main part of the day then focused on walking trainees through how to run a session and key take-home messages in small groups, and giving trainees the opportunity to run practice sessions on which they would receive feedback from instructors. Trainings would then conclude with a whole group question and answer session and advice on how to prepare for and de-brief from sessions. The facilitators with whom we spoke had run workshops for between one and six years.

Though workshops can cover 'traditional' sex education topics such as birth control and preventing sexually transmitted diseases (if a given school has not already covered these topics), workshops more often use conversation, role play and activities to explore issues of power in relationships; gender norms and how they shape behaviour; the importance of consent and communication; and the importance of acknowledging and respecting people of all genders and sexual orientations.<sup>7</sup> Workshops are typically 'sex positive', or as one facilitator put it, about promoting 'equality of pleasure'. As one workshop facilitator articulated this approach: 'everyone's equally deserving of respect and equally deserving of healthy relationships and equally deserving to make choices in the bedroom that make them feel good' (Laurie); while another noted: 'everything sex-related is all about ... making sure that both parties are always comfortable and happy and getting what they want out of anything that they're doing' (Freya).

In contrast to how sex education was delivered in the not very distant past, workshops are explicitly homo-, bi- and trans-inclusive. Questions regularly arise about how someone 'knows' if they are not heterosexual or cis-gender, and how one goes about coming out. Facilitators explicitly communicate the message that it is okay to be gay, lesbian or bisexual, non-binary or transgender, and are aware that for some students this may be the first time they have heard that.

To give a sense of how workshops address some of these issues, consider 'the string exercise'. Facilitators began the exercise by asking for two student volunteers to each hold one end of a long piece of string with a ribbon tied in the middle. Facilitators then explained that for the purpose of the exercise the volunteers were in a relationship. This often triggered laughter from the students at the idea of their classmates being 'in a relationship', and, if the volunteers were the same gender, sometimes protestations of 'but I'm not gay!' or 'so they're gay, then?'. This created an opportunity to discuss the concept of homophobic microaggressions such as using the term 'gay' in a derogatory manner, and having respect and empathy for others of different sexual orientations and gender identities. This discussion was usually initiated by students in the group remarking on the comments made by their peers (as opposed to being initiated by the facilitators), and provided a productive way to open discussion on difference and respect.

Facilitators then explained to the students holding the string that they were playing the (intentionally gender neutral) characters of 'Jo' and 'Sam', and that the ribbon in the middle represented the power in their relationship. Facilitators also explained that Sam and Jo (often in response to student questions) can be any gender or no gender. Facilitators then told a story about Jo and Sam's relationship, stopping at regular points to ask the students about the power balance in the relationship. Students had to decide if the power balance remained equal (in which case the ribbon stayed in the middle), or if the power was leaning towards one person, in which case the student volunteer had to pull more string towards them, moving the ribbon closer to that person. At every stage this elicited conversation about causes of power imbalances, such as age or finances, and types of abuse such as emotional, physical and social isolation. The overall story is one of a more abusive partner (Jo) who holds most of the power in the relationship, and at the end of the story Sam ends the relationship and one of the students is asked to come up and cut the string.

After sharing signposting websites and contact numbers for helplines and places to access further information, facilitators asked participants what they thought of the exercise, what surprised them and what they felt they could take away. The ensuing conversation often included discussions around gender stereotypes, surprise that abuse can

happen across different kinds of relationships (and that it can be perpetrated by women), and discussion of non-physical abuse. The exercise thus opens a platform for discussing ideas around gender binaries, heteronormativity, microaggressions, power in relationships and how to identify different kinds of abuse. Having outlined the key features of the research project on which this paper is based and given a bit of background on gender workshops, let us now turn to explore what kinds of spaces are needed to get young people to critically reflect on their views about sex and gender and how these spaces are produced, focusing on themes of atmosphere curation, relationality and empathy generation.

## 4 | ANALYSIS

### 4.1 | Atmosphere curation

Extending Chatterton and Pickerill's observation about the importance of affective atmospheres in everyday activism (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010), we found atmosphere to play a significant role in the forms of gender activism considered here. At the beginning of each workshop, facilitators had to generate a certain tone or atmosphere in order for the workshop to be a success. Though taking place in the familiar space of classrooms within students' own schools, they are nevertheless considerably different content-wise from the typical curriculum. As Al put it, as a rule sex and gender workshops are 'more intense than maths'. Getting students to feel comfortable discussing topics of body image, power in relationships and sexual intimacy requires creating a certain kind of space. This is done both formally by establishing 'ground rules' at the beginning of the session, as well as informally through the duration of the session through what we term *atmosphere curation*. At the beginning of each session students must agree to be respectful; listen to others; maintain confidentiality (i.e., not discuss personal situations); and promise that what is said in the room will stay in the room (the ground rules). As Bethany put it, the ground rules are crucial 'in creating an ambience and an atmosphere' of trust and mutual respect. These rules are about creating a safe space (Lewis et al., 2018) in which students feel secure asking questions which could be embarrassing or deeply personal (even if framed in a confidential way).

Gender workshops bring a sense of lightness and even play to what many teens may consider to be an embarrassing, awkward (or possibly even shameful) topic to discuss within the space of their school. Facilitators explained that they seek to create a space where students felt comfortable speaking, noting that 'people need to be able to ask questions that they think are stupid or embarrassing without judgment' (Flynn). Facilitators noted that they aimed for a tone that was informal in which everyone felt accepted and supported, which could function as a 'space of curiosity' (Lisa). To create such an atmosphere, Laurie explained that 'we just provide an atmosphere where they can ask', while Lisa told us how she approached sessions as 'having a chat' rather than a 'giving a lesson' with the aim being to create a 'relaxed, open feel'. Lisa went on to note how she achieved this through language 'Use (ing) the same slang they use' and keeping her body language relaxed. Along the same lines, Abe told us: 'You've kind of got to go in with a "it's all good, we're going to talk about this and it's fun and it's fine" mentality'.

A goal mentioned by several facilitators was to create a vibe that was 'chill'. As Abe put it, he aimed to 'just have a little chat like it's very chilled', while Laurie noted that 'in that setting the kind of vibe you need to set is very much that you're very chilled out, you're, like, on their level and it's all just calm and you're just going to chat through it', adding that creating opportunities for students to talk on subjects about which they felt confident helped give the room an added 'lightness'. This was echoed by Faye and Derek who both noted the importance of being able to be 'lighthearted' in at least some parts of the session. While sessions raise big/heavy topics like consent, power and coercion, as Derek noted, students were typically excited for the chance to engage issues relating to sex in the time and space of their school. As he observed:

there's definitely, like, positive emotions in terms of ... them clearly enjoying it more than they might do their usual lesson that they sort of traditionally attend in that classroom ... I think because you are talking about things that aren't really talked about, or things that are pushed to one side, maybe in a very British way.

On similar lines, Bethany commented how when a facilitator was passionate about the subject 'you can feel it. You can sort of ... you can feel that in the room, you know. It's like a sixth sense, isn't it?' Similarly, after creating the desired tone, Derek, Bethany and other facilitators noted the need to maintain it by attending to the emotional resonances of the room, drawing on 'non-verbals' to gently 'bringing the room back' if things began to get rowdy or overly personal.

We suggest that these practices can be understood as forms of atmosphere curation. Through these quotes we can get a sense of how atmospheres in gender workshops emerge out of a practice of ‘attending to what’s happening’ (Stewart, 2011, p. 448), gently guided by facilitators through the establishment of ground rules and attending to body language and tone to create a ‘shared ground from which subjective states and their attendant feelings and emotions emerge’ (Anderson, 2009, p. 78). Recalling Anderson’s consideration of atmospheres as collective affects (Anderson, 2009, p. 77) and Duff’s work on the role of emotional resonances and affect in constructing place meanings (Duff, 2010), we can understand the affective atmospheres of gender workshops created between facilitators and participants as playing a key role in setting the parameters for the kinds of things that can happen in such spaces. As Duff notes, affects operate both as ‘feelings-states as well as practices that each place makes possible’ (Duff, 2010, p. 885); while in a similar vein, Anderson notes that ‘affects are ... not only indicative of the subjective mood of certain places; they also frame the array of activities and practices potentially enactable within that place’ (Duff, 2010, p. 884). The atmospheres of gender workshops are specifically crafted to generate a type of space: open, relaxed, non-judgmental, ‘chill’, which enable young people to feel safe enough to explore their views on gender and sexuality (and potentially have these challenged).

## 4.2 | Relationality and the near-peer dynamic

In addition to cultivating a relaxed, ‘light’ atmosphere, we argue that a second feature making gender workshops successful is the ‘near-peer’ dynamic between facilitators and students. Several facilitators remarked how workshops differed from the ‘usual’ learning space within schools (Abby, Lisa), and part of this was due to the fact that facilitators were not only *not* their teachers, but were not that much older than the students themselves. As facilitators commented, this dynamic created a ‘relatability’ that was crucial to how sessions functioned (Abby, Herb), and enabled students to ask questions they might not in a group being led by their everyday teacher. As Laurie put it:

that we’re similar in age to them makes a big difference ... because we’re slightly older, just enough that we have their respect but also we’re still treated kind of bit more in a relaxed way which means you can get a little bit further with the conversations that you have with them.

Laurie unpacked the benefit of this, noting how when she moved around the room listening in on small-group break-out sessions, it ‘starts to break down those walls a little bit if they (students) realise actually we’re not, like, awkward people to make them feel uncomfortable, we’re there to help them learn in their own way’. Herb echoed this sentiment adding that the relaxed atmosphere enabled by the near-peer dynamic was down not only to how facilitators were viewed by students, but also by the freshness of the memory of being at the students’ stage amongst facilitators and how this informed how they approached sessions. As Herb put it: ‘we’re only 20, 21, 22 ... so not much older (than the students)’, confiding that, ‘I’m still there’ in reference to how he viewed his current self in relation to his own late-teen self.

Building on the near-peer theme, some facilitators noted other ways in which shared characteristics between themselves and students shaped and enhanced their workshops. Consider, for example, how Nathan, who is of Afro-Jamaican and Indo-Trinidadian heritage, viewed the way his first-hand understanding about how expectations around embodiment and sexuality can be racialised shapes his practice as a workshop facilitator:

I’ll have certain associations with students at a certain school because I look like them or I come from a similar area and have to use that to my advantage ... So if I’m talking to young men in the room, their experiences of sex and how they’re sexualised and the expectations placed on them in a sexual setting or a romantic setting is different based on their upbringing and how it’s categorised and stereotyped by society ... Most men are going to feel like they need to perform sex and be good at sex but it might be slightly different for black men or black boys in terms of what they think they’re supposed to do in the bedroom and what they’re supposed to look like in the bedroom too. So for me it’s about acknowledging those differences and expectations to have healthy conversations around it too, because I can’t just teach one version of masculinity or one version of sex ed for all kids because it’s different for all of them.

We suggest that these forms of relationality—by age, and sometimes also by race and/or cultural heritage—and recognition of how intersectional difference can shape understandings of embodiment, gender and sexuality enable a particular kind of openness and sense of trust in sessions that is fundamental to how they function. As Duff notes, intimacy is



a relational achievement (Duff, 2010, p. 890). Research shows students often feel embarrassed in teacher-led RSE lessons (Pound et al., 2016), as young people tend to view older adults as being on the other side of a generational divide in their views on sex, sexual orientation and gender identity (Allen et al., 2021). In contrast, the age proximity of the near-peer dynamic enables sessions to be more relaxed as the facilitator is more akin to a peer than a teacher, and the content is framed in ways that are more relatable to participants' lives (Sun et al., 2018). In this light we argue that the near-peer dynamic in gender workshops enables the creation of spaces in which students feel able to reflect on some of their most private and intimate feelings and experiences, including different pressures and expectations they may be feeling in sexual situations and about how their bodies look. These reflections illustrate both some of the ways gender and sexuality are recognised as intersecting with race and ethnicity in gender workshops, as well as the benefits of having workshop facilitators who are themselves not too many miles away from being in the 'same place' as students.

A final point we would like to make about the near-peer relation in gender workshops is the way it can lead to a dynamic of lateral learning, both between students as well as between students and facilitators. Without sharing personal details, students (typically heterosexual boys) who may be unaware may learn how prevalent sexual harassment is for girls and gender non-conforming students. But likewise, facilitators told us they also learned from sessions. As Meena put it, 'I learn as much as I educate', while Anastasia remarked 'we can all learn together', and Nathan added, 'A lot of consent stuff just comes from the community: that's because we've learnt from them and talk to them: so it's like, you know ... what can we learn from each other?' Reinforcing the idea of reciprocity within sessions, Jeremy noted, 'if you ask them to be open, you have to be', while Laura put it even more bluntly, observing 'you're not the only one with good ideas'.

Growing organically, we suggest, out of the near-peer dynamic in which many facilitators viewed their role as being closer to that of a friend than that of a teacher (Herb), facilitators told us they 'want to learn from them (students) as much as we want them to learn from us' (Allen), and even 'I learn more than I teach' (Brian). These comments convey the strongly collaborative, reciprocal approach to learning and teaching amongst the workshop facilitators in our study sample, and resonate with Chatterton and Pickerill's findings in which differently situated stakeholders all contribute to shaping a given space's meaning (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010).

### 4.3 | Empathy, collective action and world-making

What these practices of atmosphere curation and the near-peer relation between facilitators and students enable is the creation of spaces in which young people can critically reflect on their views on gender and sexuality, and generate empathy for others including those of other genders and sexual orientations. As we would expect, the broad goals of gender and sexuality workshops were expressed in slightly different terms across different workshop facilitators. At a fundamental level one goal was to simply emphasise the need for more communication around sex. As Alina put it: 'it's the most basic of things: like, just communicate with your partner'; and, relatedly, at an even more basic level, simply recognising the humanity, agency and subjectivity of others, including sexual and romantic partners. As Herb put it (framing it in this case through the first person):

'When I'm asking to do something with another person I need to think about them *as a person*' ... even if they just pick up on that one element, thinking about the other person you are asking for anything in a relationship as a fully formed person, with their own preferences and ideas.

As shocking/depressing as it may sound that this lesson needs to be taught, these points were framed in the context of exposure to misogynistic content on social media and online pornography in which sexual encounters typically lack either basic communication or consent and can depict women in dehumanised and sexually objectified ways (Mikorski et al., 2017; Seabrook et al., 2019).

This evidence highlights some of the ways gender workshops function as socio-political spaces. Extending scholarship on the role of emotion work in social activism in terms of how activists support one another to stave off burnout, this research helps us understand the role of the cultivation of particular emotional states as a means of driving social change. Building on Brown and Pickerill (2009 p. 26), our research highlights the importance of interpersonal relations in the promotion of social justice goals, and specifically the strategic mobilisation of emotional states such as empathy. We argue that gender workshops 'get young people to care' about issues of misogyny, homophobia and transphobia by creating spaces in which they feel safe enough to reflect on and talk about issues of disrespect and dehumanisation, and how these issues may touch their lives and the lives of others in ways they might not have considered.

Building on this, facilitators also noted the importance of not only one-on-one communication and empathy, but also developing a broader sense of community and the responsibilities one has as a friend and member of society more broadly. On the theme of cultivating a sense of responsibility for others, Joe told us that he saw one goal of gender workshops as being about 'getting people to notice when something is happening, interpreting it as a problem and then feeling responsible for doing something about it', especially in the context of stepping in to challenge sexist, homophobic or transphobic remarks or actions. In a similar vein, Nathan noted the value of this work for developing: 'unity ... kindness, (a) willingness to work together (and an) understanding of people'.

He went on to explain:

I want people to understand identities, I want them to accept identities ... I want them to think about how we can use these things to work together: how can we use that to make ... a better world for everyone?

Acknowledging longstanding patterns of sexism, homophobia, transphobia and gender violence, Bethany framed the goal of gender workshops as being 'to bring up a fire in people' about these myriad forms of gender injustice. As she put it:

Although these dreadful things have happened, this is why we are here because we want to make the change whereby people do not have to live through that ... or have to deal with feeling alone.

She went on to note that 'it's about creating a culture where people are respectful and kind towards each other, and doesn't everybody deserve that in the world?'. This 'big picture' view was echoed by Natalie who felt this work was about building a 'better world for all', resonating with the work of Bond et al. (2020) in which activists cast the work they did as 'trying to shape the world that we live in' (Bond et al., 2020 p. 758).

Summing up the point about the value of collective action movingly, Nathan cast workshops as being, in part, about asking the question: 'how can we work together as a group, because there's so much more that unites us than separates us'. These comments show gender workshops as not only a space for changing individual attitudes, but indeed for world-shaping. They point to the role of *hope* in the work of social activism (Duncombe, 2007); show how gender workshops create an *atmosphere of possibility* in which another kind of world feels possible (Anderson, 2009; Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010); and highlight how workshop facilitators function as 'political actors to build a better world' (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010, p. 481).

Finally, while a number of comments framed the work of gender workshops as world-making, it is worth highlighting that facilitators were keenly aware of the fact that this work does not happen overnight. Workshops were described as 'small steps' (Owen) from which change was gradual (Ellie and Emma) and from which facilitators looked out for and got joy from 'little wins' (Ellie and Emma). That said, facilitators also saw workshops as a beginning, a start of conversations that could continue in one form or another beyond the time and space of the workshop itself amongst friends and within families and the broader community. In this way, workshops were conceptualised almost as the proverbial stone thrown onto a body of water creating ripples in all directions.

We suggest these comments extend our understanding of the spatiality of gender activism in a number of ways. First, they show how gender workshops create space for the generation of empathy for those suffering from misogyny, homophobia and transphobia (be it in the form of street harassment, homophobic and transphobic abuse, or feeling disempowered in a relationship). Further, they create space in which participants can critically reflect on how they might be situated within gender and other kinds of power relations in their interactions with others, thus highlighting the importance of relationality in programmes of social change. In generating empathy as a strategy to advance a particular social justice goal, this work extends research on other forms of activism: including Bond and colleagues' work on climate change (Bond et al., 2020), and Pratt and Johnson's work on generating empathy for the plight of Filipino nannies through testimonial theatre (Pratt & Johnston, 2017). At the same time, we argue gender workshops differ from 'noisier' forms of activism (such as protests and other forms of direct action) in that they function through creating intimate spaces.

Finally, we argue this research shows the *multi-scalar* nature of the changes gender workshops are trying to achieve. As Chatterton and Pickerill note, through 'everyday messy practices, activists are constantly border crossing between ... the world they are stuck in and cope with ... and the world they dream of and work towards' (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010, p. 487). Gender workshops 'cultivate kindness' by promoting respect and frank communication between individuals in both heterosexual and LGBTQI+ contexts. While cultivating kindness may seem like a pedestrian goal at the scale of any one individual workshop, because RSE lessons are now a mandated part of the curriculum in England, we argue this

work has the potential to have a wide impact. As facilitators suggest, this work has the potential to be world-changing, creating the kinds of social environments 'everyone deserves'. In this way, the socio-political practices taking place in gender workshops extend our understanding of Wright's concept of the *global intimate* (Wright, 2008) and Mitchell and Kallio's concept of the *geosocial* as ways to conceptualise how intimate spaces and practices bisect the global (Mitchell & Kallio, 2017).

## 5 | CONCLUSION

This research extends understanding within and beyond Geography about spatial practices of everyday activism on the one hand, and the kinds of spaces needed to promote more positive gender cultures on the other. Through a collaborative academic-activist research project with facilitators who run gender and sexuality workshops in UK secondary schools, we extend understanding about the work of bringing about social change that takes place in 'quieter' registers and spaces, responding to Chatterton and Pickerill's call to attend to an expanded range of spaces and practices of social activism (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010).

We have argued that these workshops serve an important function by opening up space to discuss how gender, sexuality and power intersect in young people's lives, and explore feelings, questions and concerns about intimacy, relationships and bodies. We have argued that workshops function through mechanisms of atmosphere curation (and in particular the creation and maintenance of a 'chill vibe'); and the near-peer relation with an orientation towards lateral learning on the part of workshop facilitators. We have argued that through these mechanisms workshops create space for the cultivation of empathy, respect and kindness, and ultimately, provide a means to combat misogyny, heterosexism and cis-sexism. We have suggested that the social positionality of the facilitators and especially their (young) age enhances and expands the kinds of conversations that can unfold within them, and suggest that this is deeply hopeful work, in which interpersonal exchanges are understood as world-making and potentially world-changing.

That said, neither we, nor the facilitators with whom we spoke, view these workshops as some kind of easy solution or quick fix, and not every young person who holds misogynist or homophobic views will have them changed by a single workshop. There is also a potential issue of equity and social justice in terms of the delivery of high-quality RSE, since despite national requirements there is still significant unevenness in how (and how much) schools provide in terms of RSE (Emmerson, 2022), and it is easy to imagine that for schools facing crises such as food poverty amongst their pupils as a result of austerity budgeting and the cost of living crisis, programmes like RSE may drop down the list of priorities. Instead, we suggest these workshops should be viewed as one component of a broader array of different types of initiatives to promote and normalise more positive and inclusive understandings of gender and sexuality. As such, this work is not about rapid or 'single approach' social change, but rather about many small transformations or 'little wins', one workshop at a time, amidst an array or rhizomatic network of other initiatives and changing signals. Finally, we suggest this work throws up a number of different avenues for further research. The first is a more extensive exploration of the emotion work and self-care practices workshop facilitators must undertake to perform this work, and the second is the exploration of how young people experience and understand these workshops. As well, further work could also be done in terms of men's participation specifically and gender workshops as a means by which to enact feminist allyship. And finally, research could explore the personal journeys and biographies leading young people to invest time in this work.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

This paper draws on data collected for a research project on education-based initiatives to bring forth more positive gender-cultures in the UK for which we interviewed 40 gender workshop facilitators in England and Wales. Owing to the sensitive nature of these data and per ethical guidelines laid out by Cardiff University we are not able to make these data publicly available.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> 'Relationships Education, RSE and Health Education Statutory guidance', Department for Education 2019. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1019542/Relationships\\_Education\\_\\_Relationships\\_and\\_Sex\\_Education\\_\\_RSE\\_and\\_Health\\_Education.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1019542/Relationships_Education__Relationships_and_Sex_Education__RSE_and_Health_Education.pdf) [Accessed 7th March 2022].
- <sup>2</sup> This provision was section 28, as this law was colloquially referred to.
- <sup>3</sup> SRE & RSE A History of Sex Education in the UK Available at: <https://www.bigtalkeducation.co.uk/rse-information-and-support-for-schools/sre-rse-history/> [Accessed 7 June 2023].
- <sup>4</sup> "Our History, 30 years of campaigning" <https://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/about/our-history-30-years-campaigning> [Accessed 7 June 2023].
- <sup>5</sup> The national curriculum in the UK is divided into four 'key stages', with primary school being composed of key stage 1 and 2, and secondary school key stage 3 and 4.
- <sup>6</sup> Diversity in the UK Available at: <https://www.diversityuk.org/diversity-in-the-uk/> [Accessed 7 June 2023].
- <sup>7</sup> These approaches have been identified by the UK Sex Education Forum as best practices in teaching sex education (<https://www.sec-ed.co.uk/best-practice/rse-five-urgent-improvements-for-schools-relationships-sex-education-sex-education-forum-rshe-pshe-pastoral/>).

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