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She was disciplined when she retaliated but did not want to tell a male colleague about the incident" – Secondary school teacher "Boys touch girls inappropriately in corridors and at lunch/break time" – Female student "It's a bit of a shock to find this normal" – Secondary school teacher "In class boys talk about girls bodies and what they would do to them make them do noises at the teachers and at girls, ask girls in class if a particular photo was them more than the girl it looked like. Girls have cried in class several times due to abuse of intimate photos." – Secondary school teacher "Female teachers have been sexually assaulted by male pupils in corridors and classrooms. This often happens when there's a crowd or disruption so that they are more likely to get away without getting caught or identified. 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Very worrying sense of entitlement to belittle and make sexually unacceptable/threatening comments to females" – Teacher at Pupil Referral Unit "I thought I was going to fail maths and science but the teacher told me it's okay because girls tend to be better at expressive lessons." – Female student "I wanted to play football but because I'm a 'girl' they said that I'm not as good as the boys and how I'm too 'weak' to play. This happened in primary school." – Female student "At my secondary school girls were not allowed to play rugby or other stereotypically male sports like football instead we had to do dance and gymnastics which are sports the boys never had to do." – Female student "I love to play football with the boys as I did this on a weekend and played at their standard, but in a PE lesson I had to go with the girls group" – Female student "I was told not to bring the table in from the other classroom for me to use and rather the teacher asked a boy to lift it for me. Even though I was perfectly capable of doing it myself." – Female student "In things like PE it was always girls play one sport boys play another. I always liked sport until I moved up to secondary school." – Female student "I didn't like playing football and preferred spending time with girls so was teased because of that." – Male student "Was constantly bullied for being in the choir and enjoying drama. As a result of that I lost my passion for the arts." – Male student "A group of boys was bullying a kid in a lower year because of his love for drama. Me and a number of my friends put a stop to it quickly but the school couldn't do anything about it." – Male student "We were packing the cupboard but the teacher said 'leave it, that's a boys job, you go and pack the books'." – Male student "Once during an observation, I was told that instead of washing 'barbs' in the water tray, I should have put knights to engage the boys. Because of course none of the boys will grow up to be fathers who might bathe their own children. And childcare concerns females only." – Teacher "I teach design and technology. Every day I see sexist slurs towards cookery being only for girls and engineering for boys and that's coming from other teachers." – Secondary school teacher "

# “It’s just everywhere”

## A study on sexism in schools – and how we tackle it



UK FEMINISTA

**“It’s just everywhere”: A study on sexism in schools  
– and how we tackle it**

**National Education Union and UK Feminista, 2017**

The title of this report - “It’s just everywhere” - are the words of a girl who was asked about her experiences of sexism at school as part of this study.

# Contents

## **Forewords**

Page 1

## **Summary**

Page 2

## **Introduction**

Page 4

## **Sexual harassment**

Page 6

## **Sexist language**

Page 9

## **Sexist stereotypes and behaviour**

Page 12

## **Reporting and responding to sexism in schools**

Page 16

## **Action to tackle sexism**

Page 19

## **Recommendations**

Page 24

## **Resources and Endnotes**

Page 26



# Forewords

The results of UK Feminista and NEU's groundbreaking study are clear: schools, education bodies and Government must take urgent action to tackle sexism in schools. Sexual harassment, sexist language and gender stereotyping are commonplace in school settings, yet teachers report feeling unsupported and ill-equipped to respond. "It's just everywhere", commented a girl participating in the study, yet all too often the institutional response to sexism in schools is silence.

The voices of girls around the country who are being subjected to sexual harassment and sexism at school must be heard - and acted on. It is clear that schools must urgently do more to tackle sexism, but they need support and guidance to be able to do so effectively. The Government, Initial Teacher Training providers, Ofsted and individual schools all have a vital role to play.

Our recommendations identify the priority actions necessary to bring about change. They are achievable and they would be transformative. What is required now is the political will and personal commitment of all those with the power to make these changes happen - from Downing Street to the classroom.

We have a duty and an opportunity to bring about a historic shift: to stop schools being places where girls and boys learn that sexual harassment and sexism are routine, normal, accepted. It would transform school life - and society as a whole.

**Sophie Bennett**  
UK Feminista

**UK FEMINISTA**

Sexism is just everywhere. It's an issue for every school in every community. It therefore requires a commitment from each of us to make change happen.

We need to understand what creates sexism and expose the attitudes which repeat the patterns of harmful experiences that women and girls face. We need to break the mould - the expectations about men and women, and girls and boys, that perpetuate harassment and gender injustice.

Its effects are deeply harmful - for girls and boys. As uncomfortable as it might be, we have to face up to the level of sexism and sexual harassment in society and what this means for education. In this study, teachers expose the barriers which stand in their way to tackling sexism. They talk about time, training and the toxic effect of the wrong kind of targets.

The research reveals the lack of professional development on how to use schools' curriculum and students' learning to prevent sexism and sexual harassment.

We can all make a difference but we need national and local strategies to build real capacity. We urge the Government to consider the recommendations in our report.

And we must listen - to both girls and boys - and make their experiences our starting point; let's empower teachers to support positive student-led activism.

It is just everywhere. But education is one vital place to start if we want to set up different expectations for the next generation.

**Kevin Courtney and Mary Busted**  
Joint General Secretaries  
National Education Union



# Summary

## Sexual harassment

**Sexual harassment is highly prevalent in schools. It is also gendered, overwhelmingly involving boys targeting girls.**

- Over a third (37%) of female students at mixed-sex schools have personally experienced some form of sexual harassment at school.
- Almost a quarter (24%) of female students at mixed-sex schools have been subjected to unwanted physical touching of a sexual nature while at school.
- Almost one in three (32%) teachers in mixed-sex secondary schools witness sexual harassment in their school on at least a weekly basis. A further 36% say they witness it on a termly basis.

## Sexist language

**The use of misogynist language is commonplace in schools.**

- 66% of female students and 37% of male students in mixed-sex sixth forms have experienced or witnessed the use of sexist language in school.
- 64% of teachers in mixed-sex secondary schools hear sexist language in school on at least a weekly basis. Over a quarter of teachers (29%) report that sexist language is a daily occurrence.

## Sexist stereotypes and behaviour

**Gender stereotyping is a typical feature of school culture, often reinforced through mundane, 'everyday' actions.**

- A quarter of all secondary school teachers say they witness gender stereotyping and discrimination in their school on a daily basis, and a further quarter say they witness it on a weekly basis.
- Over a third (34%) of primary school teachers say they witness gender stereotyping in their school on at least a weekly basis. Over half (54%) say they witness it on at least a termly basis.
- 36% of female students in mixed-sex schools say they have personally been treated differently on account of their gender, compared to 15% of male students.

## Reporting and responding to sexism

**Sexism and sexual harassment in schools has been normalised and is rarely reported.**

- Only 14% of students who have experienced sexual harassment reported it to a teacher.
- Just 6% of students who have experienced or witnessed the use of sexist language in school reported it to a teacher.
- Over a quarter (27%) of secondary school teachers say they would not feel confident tackling a sexist incident if they experienced or witnessed it in school.

## Action to tackle sexism

Schools are currently ill-prepared and ill-equipped to tackle sexism.

- Less than a quarter (22%) of female students at mixed-sex schools think their school takes sexism seriously enough.
- 78% of secondary school students are unsure or not aware of the existence of any policies and practices in their school related to preventing sexism.
- Over half (64%) of secondary school teachers are unsure or not aware of the existence of any policies and practices in their school related to preventing sexism.
- Just one in five (20%) secondary school teachers has received training in recognising and tackling sexism as part of their Initial Teacher Education.
- Only 22% of secondary school teachers have received Continuing Professional Development training in recognising and tackling sexism.
- Barriers to tackling sexism identified by teachers include an overly heavy focus on academic subjects (identified by 69% of teachers), teacher workload being too high (identified by 68% of teachers), and the failure of school leadership to prioritise tackling sexism (identified by 62% of teachers).

## Recommendations

**Sexism in schools is endemic - but it is not inevitable. Consistent and ongoing action is required from schools, Government and education bodies to tackle it.**

### Government

- Issue guidance to all schools on how to prevent and respond to sexual harassment and sexual violence.
- Create a fund to support specialist sector organisations to provide capacity-building support to schools on tackling sexism and sexual harassment.
- Ensure the curriculum for relationships and sex education (RSE), across all key stages, is designed to prevent sexism and sexual harassment among children and young people and that RSE teachers have access to high quality professional development.

### Ofsted

- All Ofsted inspectors should receive comprehensive training on how schools can address and prevent sexism.
- Ofsted should recognise schools that take effective action to tackle sexism.
- Inspections of Initial Teacher Training (ITT) providers should include an assessment of whether the training course adequately equips trainees with the skills they need to tackle sexism in the classroom.

### Initial Teacher Training providers

- Training on how to tackle sexism should be a core and compulsory component of all ITT courses.

### Schools

- Adopt a 'whole school approach' to tackling sexism.
- Take a zero-tolerance approach to sexual harassment.

# Introduction

Inequality between women and men is embedded throughout society. The education system is no exception. In fact, previous research suggests school is a key site where sexist attitudes and behaviours are fostered and experienced. Understanding and tackling sexism in schools is therefore critical to ensuring boys and girls can learn and live as equals – and to ending sex inequality in society as a whole.

**SEXISM: Prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination, typically against women, on the basis of sex.<sup>1</sup>**

## Sex inequality in society today

- Approximately 85,000 women are raped in England and Wales every year.<sup>2</sup>
- Female MPs are outnumbered 2:1 by men in parliament.<sup>3</sup>
- On average two women are killed each week by a current or former partner in England and Wales.<sup>4</sup>
- Women working full-time are paid on average 14.1% less than men.<sup>5</sup>
- In 2017 the BBC revealed that over the previous three years, police in England and Wales received reports of 2625 sexual offences, including 225 alleged rapes, taking place on school premises.<sup>6</sup>
- 80% of boys who take maths and science GCSEs progress to a form of Level 3 core STEM qualification, yet just 33% of girls do likewise. This is despite the fact that 71.3% of girls who study STEM at GCSE achieve A\*-C grades, compared to 62.4% of boys.<sup>7</sup>
- Girlguiding UK found that 75% of girls and young women aged 11 to 21 report that anxiety about potentially experiencing sexual harassment affects their lives in some way.<sup>8</sup>

## About this research

UK Feminista and the National Education Union (NEU) commissioned the Institute for Employment Research at the University of Warwick to conduct research into the experiences and views of students and teachers regarding sexism in schools.

The Institute for Employment Research (IER) is a leading international social science research centre. IER uses multi-method, interdisciplinary approaches to generate and tackle substantive research questions. For further details visit: [www.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/)

Between January and June 2017, 1508 secondary school students in England and Wales completed an anonymous online or paper-based survey about sexism in schools.<sup>9</sup> Students were invited to take part by their school, and the majority completed the survey as part of a lesson or in tutor groups. Three discussion groups on this topic were also conducted with secondary school students.

Between January and May 2017, 1634 teachers at secondary and primary schools in England and Wales also participated in an anonymous online survey about sexism in schools. The statistics, quotes and analyses in this report are based on the findings of the surveys and discussion groups.



# Sexual harassment

**Sexual harassment is highly prevalent in schools, and overwhelmingly involves boys targeting girls.**

Sexual harassment is unwanted behaviour of a sexual nature which:

- Violates a person's dignity;
- Intimidates, degrades or humiliates someone; or
- Creates a hostile or offensive environment.<sup>10</sup>

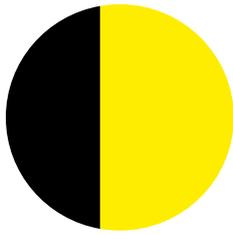
Sexual harassment can include verbal, non-verbal and physical acts – including sexual comments, taking 'up-skirt' photographs, or unwanted sexual touching.<sup>11</sup> **Unwanted sexual touching, wherein the target does not consent to the touching and the perpetrator does not reasonably believe they consent, constitutes sexual assault.**<sup>12</sup>

Reports from both students and teachers reveal that sexual harassment is prevalent in schools. For many students, **it is simply the norm.**

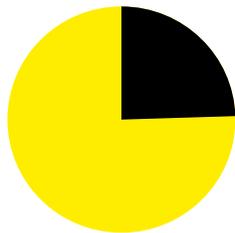
Sexual harassment in school is gendered: **the majority of cases involve boys targeting girls.** 37% of girls report experiencing sexual harassment, compared to 6% of boys. Female students are also significantly more likely to describe multiple incidents and more severe cases of sexual assault. They are also less likely to dismiss their experience as 'a joke'.

**Sexual harassment has a detrimental impact on girls' confidence and self-worth.** Both students and teachers report that as a result of sexual harassment, girls learn to 'take up less space'; to position themselves at the edges (of corridors, playgrounds and classrooms). Girls also adopt strategies to avoid being noticed and singled out for unwanted attention, even if this means they miss out on more positive attention and recognition of their achievements.

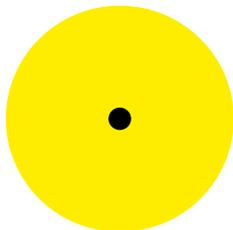
## Students



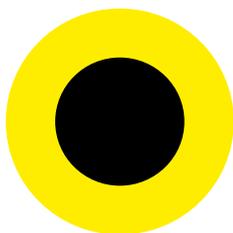
Over a third (37%) of female students at mixed-sex schools have personally experienced some form of sexual harassment at school.



Almost a quarter (24%) of female students at mixed-sex schools have been subjected to unwanted physical touching of a sexual nature while at school.



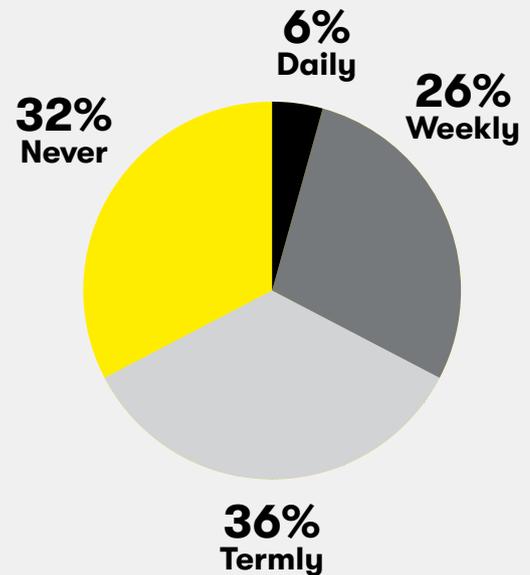
4% of male students at mixed-sex schools have experienced unwanted physical touching of a sexual nature while at school.



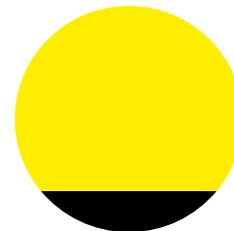
Over half (58%) of female students in mixed sex schools have experienced or witnessed sexual harassment at school.

## Teachers

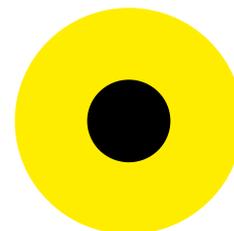
Frequency that teachers at mixed-sex secondary schools witness sexual harassment:



Almost one in three (32%) teachers in mixed-sex secondary schools witness sexual harassment in their school on at least a weekly basis.



17% of primary school teachers have witnessed sexual harassment in their school.



Over a third (38%) of secondary school teachers in mixed-sex schools are aware of students being sent or exposed to pornography at school.

“Some of the boys make comments on a lot of the girls’ in our years bodies and the girls just have to ignore it because no one thinks it’s a big deal. The boys also slap the girls butts and touch their breasts without any consent.”

– *Female student*

**“I was in a French lesson in year 8 and a boy sitting next to me kept groping my bum and tried moving his hand to my front.”**

– *Female student*

“Boys often lift skirts up and whistle and treat girls in a sexual manner and nothing gets done about it.”

– *Female student*

**“A boy touched my bum and tried to touch my boob. I felt uncomfortable and I didn’t tell him because I was scared but I tried to ignore him.”**

– *Female student*

“Some of the boys in my primary would air hump behind girls when they weren’t looking”

– *Male student*

**“A female pupil disclosed a class mate had ‘groped’ her at lunch time. She was disciplined when she retaliated but did not want to tell a male colleague about the incident.”**

– *Secondary school teacher*

**“Boys touch girls inappropriately in corridors and at lunch/break times. They all seem to find this normal”**

– *Secondary school teacher*

“In class boys talk about girls’ bodies and what they ‘would do to them’, make female sex noises at the teachers and at girls, ask girls in class if a particular photo was them, have they got it shaved, what it looks like. Girls have cried in class several times due to abuse of intimate photos.”

– *Secondary school teacher*

**“Female teachers have been sexually assaulted by male pupils in corridors and classrooms. This often happens when there’s a crowd or disruption so that they are more likely to get away without getting caught or identified. Male pupils regularly make inappropriate comments to the 6th form girls.”**

– *Secondary school teacher*

“I have been whistled at whilst trying to teach, and one extreme case where a boy pushed his crotch up against my back to intimidate me. The boy was removed from my lesson once and then I was asked to accept him back in.”

– *Female secondary school teacher*

**“Guys think it’s okay to touch girls whenever they like.”**

– *Female student*

“

# Sexist language

”

**The use of sexist language is commonplace in schools.**

**The use of sexist, misogynist language - which denigrates girls and femaleness - is commonplace in schools.**

Both male and female students report the common use of **language which associates negative characteristics with being female** - “you throw like a girl”, “don’t be a pussy” - and **more positive characteristics with being male** - “man-up”. This language is more likely to be targeted at male students, while female students are more likely to be subjected to gendered sexual name-calling - such as ‘slut’, ‘slag’ and ‘whore’.

The accepted and often casual use of language that denigrates girls/women/femaleness **fuels harmful and narrow ideas about what it means to be a man or a woman in society today**. It contributes to a conducive context for sexist attitudes and behaviours - including sexual harassment.

Sexist language is also interlinked with homophobic bullying. Students and teachers in the present study report phrases such as ‘that’s so gay’ being used by students to refer pejoratively to boys doing things stereotypically associated with girls.

## **MISOGYNY:**

**Dislike of, contempt for, or ingrained prejudice against women.<sup>13</sup>**

## Students



Over half (54%) of female students and a third of male students (34%) say they have witnessed someone using sexist language at school.



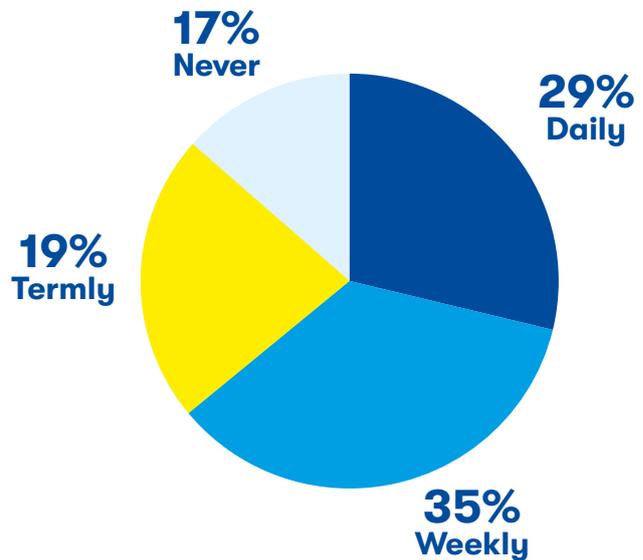
30% of female students in mixed-sex schools have personally been described using language they felt was sexist, compared to 18% of boys.



66% of female students and 37% of male students in mixed-sex sixth forms have experienced or witnessed the use of sexist language in school.

## Teachers

How frequently teachers in mixed-sex secondary schools report hearing sexist language in school:



64% of teachers in mixed-sex secondary schools hear sexist language in school on at least a weekly basis. Over a quarter of teachers (29%) report sexist language is a daily occurrence.



45% of primary school teachers say they are aware of sexist language being used on at least a termly basis; 15% witness it on at least a weekly basis.

Over three quarters (77%) of the examples primary school teachers gave of sexist language they heard in school involved boys using overtly female-pejorative statements such as 'don't be such a girl' and 'don't cry like a girl'.

“You often hear boys being told to ‘man up’ or ‘not be such a girl’ because people think being called a girl is an insult.”

– *Female student*

**“The term ‘like a girl’ is often used to describe boys and girls when they have done something weak or rubbish. This can be hurtful to boys and girls but the term shouldn’t be used as it’s hurtful on all girls who aren’t weak or rubbish.”**

– *Female student*

“Being called a slag just because I mostly had friends that were male and not many that were female in school. Told to “act like a girl” because I didn’t used to wear make-up in early years of secondary school.”

– *Female student*

**“In school a teacher told me to man up when someone was bullying me”**

– *Male student*

“I have seen this occurring in school when a teacher has told somebody else to ‘man up’. This is easily sexist as girls (females) can also become braver than boys (males). Boys have also told girls that they are not allowed to play sports such as football because it’s a ‘boys sport’”

– *Male student*

**“Often crosses over with homophobia: boys being called ‘gay’ if they like things seen as girly or show emotion.”**

– *Secondary school teacher*

**“Teaching a subject with classes dominated in number by boys, I am often trying to stop conversations about girls that are degrading, sexualised and offensive.”**

– *Secondary school teacher*

“I have [heard] a male member of staff saying to another member of staff ‘Don’t be such a girl’ in a derogative manner, which is particularly strange because we work in a girls’ school.”

– *Secondary school teacher*

**“In a staff briefing, staff as a whole were told to take ‘Man Up Pills’ in regards to high levels of staff sickness and staff feeling tired.”**

– *Secondary school teacher*

“Frequent serious violently misogynistic language used by a number of boys about and towards female staff and pupils. Very worrying sense of entitlement to belittle and make sexually unacceptable/threatening comments to females.”

– *Teacher at Pupil Referral Unit*

**“Sexist language is frequently used by students, particularly degrading words about girls.”**

– *Secondary school teacher*

“Casual misogyny part of everyday language of students and staff.”

– *Secondary school teacher*

# Sexist stereotypes and behaviour

**Gender stereotyping is a typical feature of school culture, often unconsciously reinforced through 'everyday' actions.**

False beliefs and over-generalisations about differences in girls' and boys' behaviour, preferences and abilities are prevalent throughout society. Such **gender stereotypes can have a deeply harmful impact on girls and boys, placing arbitrary restrictions on children's behaviour and aspirations while fuelling prejudice and discrimination.**

Gender stereotyping in schools **reinforces particular ideas about what is expected and acceptable behaviour from women and men:** such as that women are weak and emotional, while men are strong and brave.

A significant portion of teachers report that **sexism is an everyday occurrence in the classroom,** and that small, seemingly insignificant events together create an environment in which pupils of both sexes come to see each other as different.

Gender stereotypes are sometimes reflected or reinforced by differential treatment in schools. The most common example students in this study gave concerned the activities that they are (or are not) allowed to participate in. Most frequently, this entails **male and female students having to participate in different sports,** either as a result of school policy or as a result of being excluded by other students - **such as girls not being allowed to play football and rugby.**

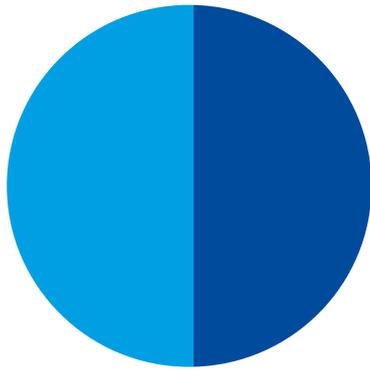
Male students are less likely than girls to express a desire to participate in sports associated with the opposite sex, but students report **difficulties faced by male students who want to participate in more artistic activities,** such as dance and drama.

As students progress through the school and have more opportunities to choose the subjects they study, so the influence of gender stereotypes in shaping those subject choices can be observed. This includes the stereotype that maths and science are 'boys' subjects' while art and English are 'girls' subjects'.

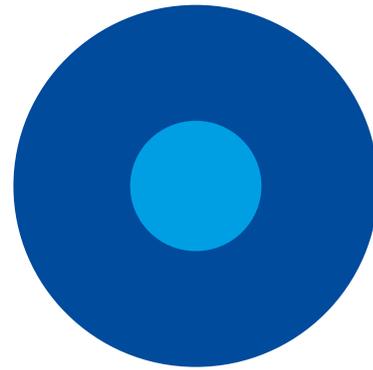
The resulting sex segregation within the same school is viewed by some students and teachers as inhibiting the development of equal, respectful relationships between male and female students.

Another example given by students of differential treatment concerns the tasks assigned to them by teachers. In particular, students commonly report cases of male students exclusively being asked to undertake tasks involving strength, such as moving desks and chairs or sporting equipment. **Female students frequently report that they would like to be given the opportunity to do more physical tasks, and dislike being perceived as weaker than the male students.**

## Students

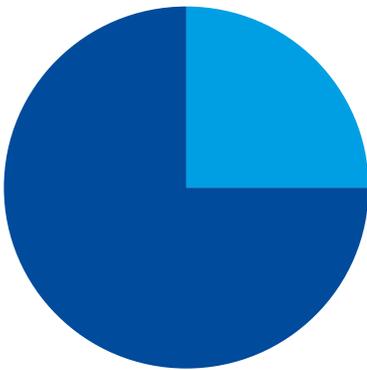


52% of female students, and a quarter of male students, say they have witnessed someone at their school being treated differently because of their gender.

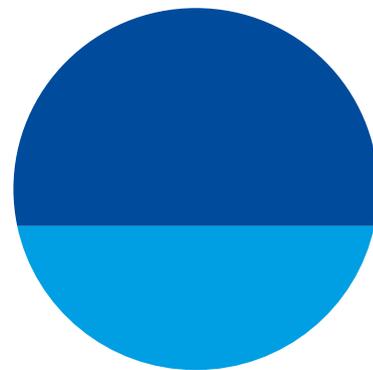


36% of female students say they have personally been treated differently on account of their gender, compared to 15% of male students.

## Teachers



A quarter (25%) of all secondary school teachers say they witness gender stereotyping and discrimination in their school on a daily basis, and a further 26% say they witness it on a weekly basis.



Over a third (34%) of primary school teachers say they witness gender stereotyping in their school on at least a weekly basis. Over half (54%) say they witness it on at least a termly basis.

"I thought I was going to fail maths and science but the teacher told me it's okay because girls tend to be better at expressive lessons."

– Female student

**"I wanted to play football but because I'm a 'girl' they said that I'm not as good as the boys and how I'm too 'weak' to play. This happened in primary school."**

– Female student

"I have heard 9 year old girls who are confident, assertive and who like playing with boys as well as girls have to justify their behaviour by saying things like 'I am a girl but I am not a girly girl'."

– Primary school teacher

**"At my secondary school girls were not allowed to play rugby or other stereotypically male sports like football. Instead we had to do dance and gymnastics which are sports the boys never had to do."**

– Female student

"I was told not to bring the table in from the other classroom for me to use and rather the teacher asked a boy to lift it for me, even though I was perfectly capable of doing it myself."

– Female student

**"In things like PE it was always girls play one sport, boys play another. I always liked sport until I moved up to secondary school."**

– Female student

**"I didn't like playing football and preferred spending time with girls so was teased because of that."**

– Male student

"Was constantly bullied for being in the choir and enjoying drama. As a result of that I lost my passion for the arts."

– Male student

**"A group of boys was bullying a kid in a lower year because of his love for drama. Me and a number of my friends put a stop to it fairly quickly but the school couldn't do anything about it."**

– Male student

"We were packing up and a girl went to put the boxes back in the cupboard but the teacher said 'leave it, that's a boys job, you go and pack the books'."

– Male student

**"Once during an observation, I was told that instead of washing 'babies' in the water tray, I should have put knights to engage the boys. Because of course none of the boys will grow up to be fathers who might bathe their own children. And childcare concerns females only."**

– Teacher

"I teach design and technology. Every day I see sexist slurs towards cookery being only for girls and engineering for boys and that's coming from other teachers."

– Secondary school teacher

"I work in a private school where the gender roles are still very clearly defined. The boys wear shorts, the girls long skirts, the boys play football, the girls, netball. Often boys are asked questions in maths/science before the girls - and boys often talk for the girls."

– *Primary school teacher*

**"I am a female DT [Design Technology] teacher and a lot of sexism that I face stems from parents. When showing them my workshop I often have a lot of comments about who the real teacher is, on parents evenings I'm asked if I am the only teacher of the subject (I specialise in woodwork). I also have fathers who try to tell me how to do my job. This seems to come across then from students as well."**

– *Secondary school teacher*

"I work in a special school where children are not always able to express their own choices, these are then often swayed by the adult's preference and stereotyping: 'you're a girl you'd like the pink book', etc."

– *Teacher*

**"Little things every day, e.g. a teacher in another class has two 'VIP' cushions for two different children each day, one boy and one girl. One cushion is pink with Disney princesses all over it and [the other] is red and blue with superheroes."**

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– *Secondary school teacher*

**"A project called 'man up' is aimed at boys at the school I work at with behavioural issues. This term is constantly said to boys with the intention of maturing them."**

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"As a male, I'm always the first to be asked to help move furniture, get things down from shelves, discipline boys etc and the last to be asked to help with changing children, help out with cooking and craft work and make displays."

– *Primary school teacher*

**"Assumption as a male I want to become SLT [Senior Leadership Team]."**

– *Primary school teacher*

# Reporting and responding to sexism in schools

**Sexism and sexual harassment in schools has been normalised and is rarely reported by students.**

The reporting of incidents of sexism and sexual harassment is crucial to providing support to those who experience it, establishing the scale of the problem, and preventing it from occurring in the future. To enable this, students need to know how and who to report incidents to, and be confident that they will be taken seriously and the report acted upon. While there are some schools doing excellent work to identify and respond to sexism, our research findings indicate that the majority of schools are not.

The main reason students give for not reporting incidents of sexism and sexual harassment is how common it is: **it is seen as an everyday part of students' lives.**

**There is a vicious cycle of under-reporting of sexism in schools.** Even when an incident occurs that students clearly recognise as harmful and unwanted, **students are currently unlikely to report it. They do not believe the teacher would take reports of sexism and sexual harassment seriously,** and anticipate that they would be viewed as being difficult and oversensitive.

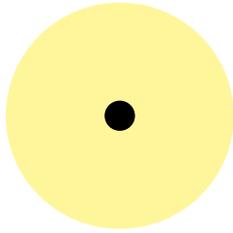
Underreporting contributes to a view among school leaders that sexism is not a problem requiring action - so the issue is not raised with students. This institutional silence on the matter fuels the perception (or recognition) among students that sexism and sexual harassment is considered to be 'normal' and unimportant, which in turn fuels a reluctance among students to report it.

The findings also reveal that many teachers acknowledge that even in a scenario in which they are aware of a sexist incident having taken place, they would be unclear about how to respond.

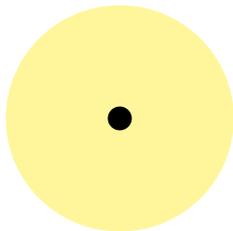
***"It happens everywhere, school is no exception and it has become an everyday norm, which I find unacceptable"***

**- Female student**

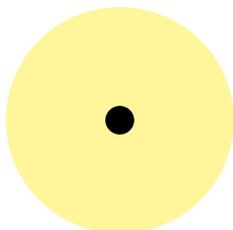
## Students



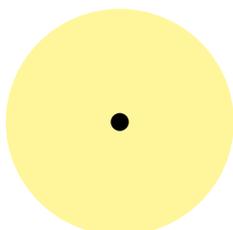
Only 14% of students who have experienced sexual harassment reported it to a teacher.



Just 10% of students who have witnessed someone being sexually harassed have reported this to a teacher.

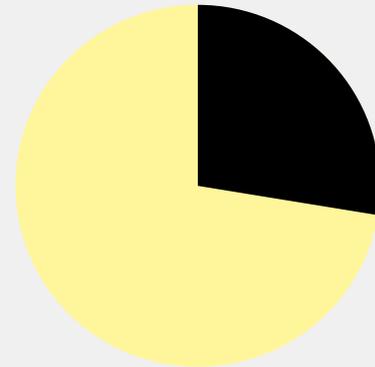


11% of female students who have been sexually harassed in school say that one of the reasons they did not report it was they felt ashamed that it happened and were scared of the consequences of reporting it.



Just 6% of students who have experienced or witnessed the use of sexist language in school reported it to a teacher.

## Teachers



Over a quarter (27%) of secondary school teachers say they would not feel confident tackling a sexist incident if they experienced or witnessed it in school.

Of the teachers who explained their reasons in the present study for not feeling confident about tackling a sexist incident, three quarters (74%) said it was because they did not think they would be supported by leaders in their school.

“I wasn’t aware that these incidents could be reported, no students have ever been told it is wrong to act in this way, it’s not discouraged or punished for it”

– *Female student*

**“It’s just something that happens, no matter how much we don’t like it”**

– *Female student*

“Two of the boys were saying stuff to a girl and she was like ‘leave me alone’, and the cover teacher was just laughing... I don’t find that fair.”

– *Female student*

**“I didn’t want them to think I’m overreacting”**

– *Female student*

“I felt embarrassed about it and wanted to pretend the situations didn’t happen”

– *Female student*

**“It seems way too common to report things like this and even if I did report it, it would be considered trivial and set aside”**

– *Male student*

“They’re general, everyday comments that people don’t pick out, or notice to be sexist”

– *Female student*

**“It is something that when it occurs it seems to be that we all take it as ‘just how it is”**

– *Female student*

“It’s so commonplace it probably wouldn’t be treated as much of an issue”

– *Female student*

**“Like many people I wouldn’t be overly confident that I would receive full support from the leadership team thereafter. These incidents are still seen too often as rather trivial”**

– *Secondary school teacher*

“I would feel like I’m raising an issue that others don’t care about as they have too much to do. I think people would be angry with me for giving them more behavioural issues to deal with.”

– *Secondary school teacher*

**“I would not imagine the SLT [Senior Leadership Team] would take it seriously. Or it would need to be a very serious incident for them to do so. It is the drip drip drip effect of minor sexism that causes most damage”**

– *Secondary school teacher*

“It is never taken seriously. No one cares if it does not affect them. You suffer in silence and get told to move on”

– *Male student*

# Action to tackle sexism

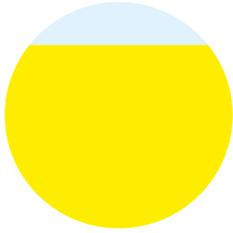
**Schools currently lack the policies and procedures to identify and tackle sexism.**

**Teachers are ill equipped to address sexism, and female students in particular feel unsupported in the face of normalised sexism and sexual harassment.**

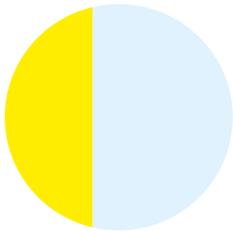
In order to take effective action against sexism, schools need to listen to girls and learn about their daily experiences. Boys must also be actively engaged on the issue in order to challenge the harmful attitudes that underpin sexual harassment and sexism. Yet a key issue identified by both teachers and students in this study is summed up by the words of one secondary school teacher: **“we don’t talk about sexism”**. Teachers report being unclear about what constitutes sexism or how to explain to students why it is harmful. This perpetuates a lack of awareness and understanding of the issue, as well as the perception that it is not taken seriously by the school.

Where policies to address sexism do exist in secondary schools, they tend to be part of broader policy frameworks covering equal opportunities, bullying and safeguarding. Incidents of sexism are often recorded as generic bullying or disagreements, and subsumed within broader discussions of student interactions. This prevents the recognition and recording of events specifically as sexism or sexual harassment. There are often no clear, understood definitions of what constitutes sexism or sexual harassment. As a result, **sexism and sexual harassment in schools are commonly unnamed and unrecorded.**

## Students



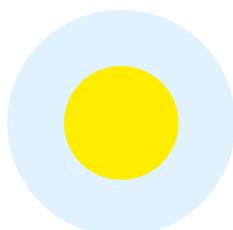
78% of secondary school students are unsure or not aware of the existence of any policies and practices in their school related to preventing sexism.



Of the secondary school students who are aware of policies or practices in their school to prevent sexism, less than half (40%) of female students, compared to just over half (53%) of male students, think they are definitely effective.



Less than a quarter (22%) of female students at mixed-sex schools think their school takes sexism seriously enough, just 17% think their school does enough to stop sexism, and less than a quarter (23%) think their school sufficiently supports them to tackle sexism.



Half (50%) of female secondary school students say they would like more opportunities to discuss sexism in school.

**Proportion of secondary school students who are aware of any rules or policies in their school for preventing sexism:**



**Opinions of students at mixed-sex secondary schools about their school's response to sexism:**

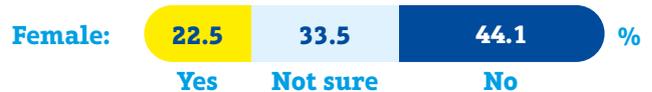
**'Sexism at school is taken seriously enough'**



**'My school does enough to stop sexism'**

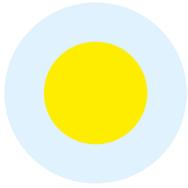


**'My school helps me to get enough skills and confidence to tackle sexism'**

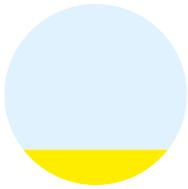


Male students in single-sex schools are significantly more likely than male students in mixed-sex schools (and female students in any school) to dismiss sexism as an issue, either in their school or in society in general, and to express the most strongly negative attitudes about learning about sexism at school.

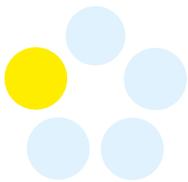
## Teachers



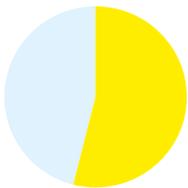
Over half (64%) of secondary school teachers are unsure or not aware of the existence of any policies and practices in their school related to preventing sexism.



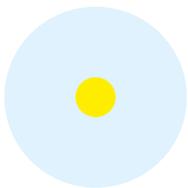
Under a quarter (22%) of secondary school teachers think that the national curriculum provides adequate scope and flexibility to enable schools to prevent sexism and gender inequality, and 46% think that it definitely does not.



Just one in five (20%) secondary school teachers has received training in recognising and tackling sexism as part of their Initial Teacher Education.



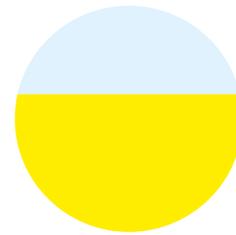
Over half (58%) of primary and secondary school teachers have never received any training to recognise and tackle sexism.



Only 22% of secondary school teachers have received Continuing Professional Development in recognising and tackling sexism.



Barriers to tackling sexism identified by teachers include an overly heavy focus on academic subjects (identified by 69% of teachers), teacher workload being too high (identified by 68% of teachers), and the failure of school leadership to prioritise tackling sexism (identified by 62% of teachers).



62% of primary and secondary school teachers want to receive training on tackling sexism.

Asked what would help them to tackle sexism in school more effectively, teachers' most common suggestion is to build awareness: acknowledge that sexism is an issue and that it needs to be addressed.

“There’s no rules for like skirt lifting or anything. There’s rules for swearing at each other but not for like touching or skirt lifting.”

– *Female student*

**“Teachers do not know what to do. Teachers desperately need training on how to respond to sexism and sexual negativity. I repeatedly see teachers simply ignore extremely negative language or class everything as ‘inappropriate’ without being able to give the young person any insight. I have seen boys mime raping girls and just been kept back at lunch for a detention, no explanation given to them other than when I made myself involved.”**

– *Secondary school teacher*

“There is a policy on equality issues, which says all it is expected to say, but the implementation of it is not monitored (except in the run-up to an inspection)”

– *Secondary school teacher*

**“Recognising it would be a start...”**

– *Secondary school teacher*

“It is part of the school code of conduct. But the details on what to do are vague.”

– *Secondary school teacher*

**“I would like to pull the pupils up on their behaviour but don’t feel as though this would be backed up by SLT.”**

– *Teacher*

**“I feel that the school staff as a whole should have some gender equality training.”**

– *Primary school teacher*

“I think that having a senior leadership that is absolutely solid on the issue is immensely important.”

– *Nursery school teacher*

**“Included in the school policies and a lot of lip service is paid but the certificates are still blue for boys and pink for girls.”**

– *Secondary school teacher*

“There are no systems in place and a lack of support from SLT. This is at an all boys school where sexism and poor attitudes towards female staff is rampant.”

– *Secondary school teacher*

**“It is imperative that staff are able to call it out and to be taken seriously. In my experience there is little support. The one female member of SLT who took on the issue of sexist bullying was told by the Head to step away as it didn’t involve her. This left an overall feeling of SLT being an ‘old boys network’.”**

– *Secondary school teacher*

“Although major incidents are dealt with as they are more severe, the more ‘casual’ sexism is seen as ‘normal’ and I do not think this behaviour is dealt with or regarded as an issue.”

– *Secondary school teacher*



# Recommendations

**Sexism in schools is endemic - but it is not inevitable. Consistent and ongoing action is required from schools, Government and education bodies to tackle it.**

## Government

**The Department for Education (DfE) must urgently make tackling sexism and sexual harassment in schools a policy priority. To realise this policy priority, the DfE should:**

- Issue guidance to all schools on how to prevent and respond to sexual harassment and sexual violence. The guidance should be developed in consultation with sexual violence specialists, education professionals and education unions.
- Create a fund to support specialist sector organisations to provide capacity-building support to schools on tackling sexism and sexual harassment.
- Ensure the curriculum for relationships and sex education (RSE), across all key stages, is designed to prevent sexism and sexual harassment among children and young people and that RSE teachers have access to high quality professional development.

## Ofsted

- All Ofsted inspectors should receive comprehensive training on how schools can address and prevent sexism.
- Ofsted should recognise schools that take effective action to tackle sexism.
- Inspections of Initial Teacher Training (ITT) providers should include an assessment of whether the training course adequately equips trainees with the skills they need to tackle sexism in the classroom.

## Initial Teacher Training Providers

- Training on how to tackle sexism should be a core and compulsory component of all ITT courses.

## Schools

### **Adopt a ‘whole school approach’ to tackling sexism.**

A ‘whole school approach’ means action to promote equality between girls and boys is supported by an over-arching framework involving all members of the school community. This enables a consistent approach and long-term change.

The three key components of a whole school approach are:

- *An institutional framework*: put in place a strategy, support it through school policy, and drive it with leadership.
- *Building staff capacity*: equip teachers and all staff with the skills, knowledge and resources to understand, identify and tackle sexism, including through the provision of training opportunities.
- *Empowering students*: enable students to discuss and learn about sexism, to report incidents, and to take action for equality.

### **Take a zero-tolerance approach to sexual harassment.**

- Sexual harassment should be specifically and explicitly addressed through school policy, including clear procedural guidelines which are consistently enforced.
- All staff should know what the school’s policies and procedures are regarding incidents of sexual harassment.
- All students should be aware of the school’s zero-tolerance approach to sexual harassment and be supported to report incidents.

# Resources

For resources and guidance on how to tackle sexism in schools visit:

[ukfeminista.org.uk](http://ukfeminista.org.uk)

[teachers.org.uk/equality/equality-matters](http://teachers.org.uk/equality/equality-matters)

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Oxford Dictionaries: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/sexism>

<sup>2</sup> End Violence Against Women coalition: <http://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/about/data-on-violence-against-women-and-girls/>

<sup>3</sup> Election 2017: Record number of female MPs', BBC News, 10/6/17: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election-2017-40192060>

<sup>4</sup> Women's Aid: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/what-is-domestic-abuse/how-common-is-domestic-abuse/>

<sup>5</sup> 'Gender Pay Gap and Causes Briefing', Fawcett Society, 2017

<sup>6</sup> 'Child-on-child sexual assaults soar, police figures reveal', the Guardian, 9/10/17: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/oct/09/child-on-child-sexual-assaults-soar-police-figures-reveal>

<sup>7</sup> 'From Classroom to Boardroom: The STEM Pipeline', WISE: <https://www.wisecampaign.org.uk/resources/2016/11/from-classroom-to-boardroom-the-stem-pipeline>

<sup>8</sup> 'Girls' Attitudes Survey', Girlguiding UK, 2015: <https://www.girlguiding.org.uk/globalassets/docs-and-resources/research-and-campaigns/girls-attitudes-survey-2015.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Survey respondents were asked to provide a range of demographic data that included their ethnicity, sex, gender identity and sexual orientation. All statistically significant relationships from which conclusions could reliably be drawn are included in this report.

<sup>10</sup> Citizens Advice: <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/law-and-courts/discrimination/what-are-the-different-types-of-discrimination/sexual-harassment/>

<sup>11</sup> For further information about sexual harassment visit the Equality and Human Rights Commission website: <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance/what-harassment>

<sup>12</sup> Crown Prosecution Service: [http://www.cps.gov.uk/legal/p\\_to\\_r/rape\\_and\\_sexual\\_offences/soa\\_2003\\_and\\_soa\\_1956/#a11](http://www.cps.gov.uk/legal/p_to_r/rape_and_sexual_offences/soa_2003_and_soa_1956/#a11)

<sup>13</sup> Oxford Dictionaries: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/misogyny>



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You suffer in silence and get told to move on"** – *Male student* "Guys think it's okay to touch girls whenever they like." – *Female student* **"Assumption as a male I want to become SLT [Senior Leadership Team]."** – *Primary school teacher* "A boy told the female teacher to 'get back in the kitchen'." – *Female student*



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[ukfeminista.org.uk](http://ukfeminista.org.uk)

[neu.org.uk](http://neu.org.uk)