

Sexism in primary schools

Research by UK Feminista and the NEU¹ shows that sexist language, sexual harassment and gender stereotyping are widespread in UK primary schools. It is experienced by both students and teachers.

“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*

Exposure to sexism amongst younger children fosters discriminatory attitudes and limits aspirations. It has a deeply harmful impact on children and a detrimental impact on girls’ confidence and self-worth. Understanding sexism in schools is therefore critical to promoting respect between boys and girls, and creating an environment where children can learn and live as equals. So how does sexism manifest in primary schools?

“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*

Sexist language

- 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’.

Sexual harassment

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

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

Gender stereotyping

- 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.

“Teachers painting children’s nails at the Christmas fair comment[ed] negatively / implying in a humorous way how this was a strange thing to do when a boy asked for his nails to be painted.” – *Primary school teacher*

¹ “It’s Just Everywhere”: A study on sexism in schools and how we tackle it, UK Feminista and the National Education Union, 2017