

# Support staff experiences of sexism

In 2024, Unison and UK Feminista surveyed over 2000 support staff<sup>1</sup> in schools across the UK to find out about their experiences of sexism and sexual harassment.

The survey revealed that support staff, including women and men, are commonly experiencing sexist language, sexual harassment and gender stereotyping in their school settings, carried out by staff, students and parents.

## Sexist language

- 15% of respondents had personally experienced sexist language in their school in the last five years.
- Female respondents commonly reported being spoken to or about using highly derogatory, sexualised, objectifying and intimidating language. They also reported being vocally dismissed and undermined in relation to their sex, which sometimes had an ageist or homophobic dimension or related to menopause, menstruation or childbearing.

"Older male students have been very misogynistic and threatening towards me which was so bad they were banned from the area I work in. I now have a radio as I'm a lone worker." - *female Librarian*

"I have been repeatedly intimidated and/or ignored by some male students whilst they make it clear they do not need to listen to a woman." - *female Timetabler*

"...I have been called a bitch and a C word by male pupils for upholding school rules." - *female Higher Level Teaching Assistant*

## Gender stereotyping

- 18% of respondents had personally experienced gender stereotyping in their school in the last five years.
- Some male respondents spoke of being gender stereotyped by the Senior Leadership Team and other staff, for example being asked to lift heavy boxes and being told that they have 'man flu' when they are ill.

"As a male TA<sup>2</sup> working in a primary school I am often the recipient of a lot of gender stereotyping. It is mostly from management giving me the heavy lifting job because I'm male even though I have back problems" - *male Teaching Assistant*

"...as a premises supervisor and a female... due to the fact I stereotypically do a male role therefore I get treated like I don't know what I am on about or spoken down to" - *female Premises Supervisor*

1 Support staff can include a wide range of roles including Exams Officers, Technicians, Pastoral Officers, Teaching Assistants, Site Managers, Admin Officers, Lunchtime Supervisors and Librarians.

2 Teaching Assistant.

“Those of us who are support staff are all female. The role is seen as “less” and “women’s work” - and we are underpaid. No man would do this job as it is looked down on...” - *female SEND<sup>3</sup> Assistant*

## Sexual harassment

- 7% of respondents had personally experienced sexual harassment in their school in the last five years.
- Respondents reported sexual harassment in the form of unwanted comments, and in some cases physical touching. Some respondents reported that the sexual harassment they experienced from students with SEND was dismissed.

“Inappropriate sexual comments and physical advances from a male pupil, including attempting to kiss me, and pushing my head towards his genitals while I was sat down in front of him” - *female Learning Support Assistant*

“Intrusive staring & ‘stalkerish’ behaviour (following/unwanted interactions/trying to touch) from some female members of staff who make it very clear they fancy me. I’m gay and not interested in women” - *male ICT<sup>4</sup> Staff Member*

“Child touching my breasts but was told it was to do with his autism” - *female Learning Support Assistant*

“Being asked in corridor by a group of boys whether I wanted to “see their big dick””  
- *female Teaching Assistant*

“Outside of working hours on work nights out - persistent behaviour from one male individual. Inappropriate comments made about my body and things would like to do to me.” - *female Admin Officer*

“I have had male parents stare at my cleavage, tell me I am beautiful whilst staring at my breasts and also ask if there is man they can speak to (usually in regards to building work)” - *female Business Officer*

<sup>3</sup> Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.

<sup>4</sup> Information and Communication Technology.