

Guidance for primary school governors



About this guide

This guide outlines key information for governors on how and why primary schools need to take action to tackle sexism.



How does sexism manifest in primary schools?

- Research by UK Feminista and the NEU shows that sexist language, sexual harassment and gender stereotyping are widespread in UK primary schools.¹ It is experienced by both students and teachers.
- 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.
- 17% of primary school teachers have witnessed sexual harassment in their school.
- 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.
- Find out more in UK Feminista's factsheet on how sexism manifests in primary schools.
- The vast majority of primary school teachers are women.² Only 14% of nursery and primary school teachers are male. Meanwhile, female teachers are less likely than their male counterparts to be in leadership positions. It is important to consider the message this sends to students about men and women in society.

It is important to combat sexism as early as possible

It is crucial to challenge gender stereotyping, sexist language and sexual harassment from a young age, in order to prevent sexism from becoming entrenched and normalised. It is also important to prevent gendered socialisation damaging the lives of future generations.

Legislation and guidance

- Equality Act 2010 - Under section 149 of the Equality Act, schools are required to have due regard to 'eliminate discrimination', 'advance equality of opportunity' and 'foster good relations' between girls and boys.
- Public Sector Equality Duty - When public authorities (including schools) carry out their functions, they must have due regard to eliminate discrimination. They must also advance equality of opportunity and foster or encourage good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- The Department for Education's 2024 'Keeping Children Safe in Education' guidance says: "Governing bodies and proprietors should ensure they facilitate a whole school or college approach to safeguarding. This means involving everyone in the school or college..." It also says "Preventative education is most effective in the context of a whole-school or college

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

2 School workforce in England, National Statistics, 2023. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-workforce-in-england>

approach that prepares pupils and students for life in modern Britain and creates a culture of zero tolerance for sexism, misogyny/misandry, homophobia, biphobic and sexual violence/harassment.”

- Ofsted’s School Inspection handbook for 2024 says that information schools must provide by 8am on the day of inspection includes “records and analysis of bullying, discriminatory and prejudiced behaviour, either directly or indirectly, including racist, sexist, disability and homophobic/ biphobic/ transphobic bullying, use of derogatory language and racist incidents” and “records and analysis of sexual harassment and/or sexual violence”.

What should governors do?

- To prevent and respond to sexism, primary schools should take a whole school approach to combating sexism. A whole school approach means action to promote equality is supported by an overarching framework and involves all members of the school community – including all staff, governors, parents/carers and students. This enables a consistent approach and sustainable and comprehensive long-term change.
- Ofsted’s School Inspection Handbook for 2024 requires that schools take a whole school approach: “Inspectors will expect schools to assume that sexual harassment, online sexual abuse and sexual violence are happening in the community, and potentially the school, even when there are no specific reports, and put in place a whole-school approach to address them.”
- Governors should ensure that school leaders are implementing a whole school approach and that regular updates on the school’s Whole School Approach Action Plan are provided at every governing board meeting.
- You might consider asking the headteacher to make this a priority in the School Improvement Plan and monitoring progress on a regular basis.

Training and resources

UK Feminista offers comprehensive support to schools who would like guidance on taking a whole school approach to combating sexism, including a free online teacher training course, live training, an online resource hub, training films and a national awards scheme. To find out more, visit our website.