

Sexism in schools survey 2024

Introduction

School support staff are critical to the smooth running of all sections of the education system. They make a vital contribution to delivering better education for children and young people.

Their positions in schools cover a range of professional, technical, managerial and site roles such as teaching assistants, technicians, lunchtime supervisors and administrators.

A major issue currently affecting schools is the rise in sexist behaviour and language, and sexual harassment. Research suggests this has been fuelled by explicit content online and on mobile phones. The perpetrators are often male pupils who target female classmates and staff.

To explore this issue, UNISON carried out a survey in collaboration with organisation UK Feminista, which campaigns for gender equality. The aim was to determine the extent of sexism in schools and how this form of prejudice is affecting employees.

About the survey

School support staff in the UK were surveyed between 20 and 29 March 2024 and 2,006 responses were received. The majority were from staff in primary schools (49%), with the rest employed in secondary schools (31%), nurseries (9%), special schools (8%), all-through schools (2%) and pupil referral units (1%).

Survey findings

The results show that sexual harassment, sexist language and gender stereotyping are a major issue in schools. Also concerning is the impact of sexist online content on the behaviour of male pupils.

Sexual harassment

One in seven (15%) respondents had witnessed sexual harassment in school in the last five years. In secondary institutions, the proportion rose to a quarter (25%). The harassment was often instigated by male pupils towards female pupils, and sometimes towards female staff members:

“Boys touching girls, pushing girls and holding them down to kiss them, playing games called ‘rape touch’, commenting on girls’ bodies.”

“Boys commenting on a female student’s chest when she sat down opposite them.”

“One boy looked up some girls’ skirts and made rude hand gestures to them.”

“A male child slapping a female colleague on the bottom.”

There were also examples of staff sexually harassing colleagues:

“A previous head teacher said inappropriate things like ‘I’ll watch you do that, it’s better than work’, or ‘stand here and look pretty, I’ll do the talking’.”

“A headmaster texted a staff member to say he wanted to see photos of how her operation went. She was having breast enhancement surgery.”

A total of 7% of staff had been sexually harassed, rising to 10% among female staff in secondary schools. Again, this was often initiated by students:

"Boys trying to slap/touch my bum."

"A boy kicked another in the privates. I went over to check on them and tell them to stop. The boy said 'Oh miss, he just needs a special rub there to feel better.'"

"I work in a primary school. A cluster of three boys in year 5 tried to embarrass me by talking about 'shagging up the arse' and asking 'do you like cum, miss?'"

"A male pupil attempted to kiss me and push my head towards his genitals while I was sat down in front of him."

Of those who had personally experienced sexual harassment, more than two in five (42%) had not reported the incident, citing that reporting was 'pointless' as such incidents were 'brushed off', or that they feared repercussions to their careers.

Sexual harassment policy

More than four in ten (47%) were unsure whether their school had a sexual harassment policy. Four per cent said their schools did not. Two in five (40%) said they would not know what to do if they witnessed something they considered sexist.

Sexist online content

Almost a quarter (24%) had witnessed pupils discussing sexist online content and more than half (51%) of these had noticed changes in pupil behaviour linked to this content. This largely took the form of sexist language and conduct from boys towards female staff and pupils:

"Saying things like women should look after the men and do housework, not go to work, and dress sexy for men."

"Boys have a sense of entitlement. They hit or slander any girl who rejects them."

"Constantly being told that as a female teacher I'm 'threatening their masculinity.'"

"Boys who frequently talk about or follow Andrew Tate seem more likely to call girls sexually offensive names. They're more dismissive of teachers and of girls' input in class."

"Some boys make it clear they've viewed pornography online. Year 9 and 10 boys in particular are arrogant towards female students and staff. Staff can challenge this but female students are being forced into silence and seem to have accepted that their place is below boys, which is extremely worrying."

Sexist language

A third (34%) of respondents had heard sexist language being used in school in the last five years, and 7% said they witnessed this behaviour daily. Sexist language was often used between students, but also by staff and parents. Fifteen per cent of staff said they were the target of verbal discrimination based on their sex or gender.

The use of derogatory female terms by students was reported as widespread, with female staff subjected to sexualised, objectifying and threatening or intimidating language.

The use of terms such as 'man up' were also commonplace towards male students, and boys who exhibited emotional behaviour were called 'girls' or told that 'boys don't cry'. Some of the language used had a homophobic dimension, with boys being told certain behaviour or attitudes were 'gay' such as spending time with girls.

"Women belong in the kitchen/should stay at home."

"I don't have to do what you tell me because you're a woman."

"Only girls cry, come on mate, be a man."

"Students say things such as 'that's gay' or 'don't be a girl'."

"In the classroom girls being called 'slags', boys laughing because another boy was crying. Girls being told they're 'fake' for wearing makeup."

"Staff and pupils are subjected to sexual and abusive language from other pupils on a daily basis."

"When boys are upset, other boys tend to call them wimps or to stop being 'girls.'"

"Boys call female pupils and staff 'bitches' and worse in the classroom, especially when females question them or don't meet their demands. Male and female pupils call boys 'wimps', 'fairies' and 'whiny little bitches.'"

"You're grumpy, must be the menopause."

"I've been repeatedly intimidated and ignored by some male students who make it clear they don't need to listen to a woman."

There was also an element of sexism, combined with ageism in some comments:

"Old woman, old bag"

"Year 6 boys called me a 'grumpy old granny.'"

Gender stereotyping

A quarter (25%) of respondents said they had witnessed gender stereotyping at their school within the last five years, with some (5%) witnessing it daily. Examples given included:

"A teenage girl was brought to tears by her middle-aged science teacher who said she couldn't be beautiful and smart at the same time."

"A male teacher laughed about boys choosing to wear a school cardigan (said they're for girls) instead of a jumper."

"Conversations between staff and students around business enterprise being a boys' subject and dance a girls' subject."

"The expression 'boys will be boys' is used when male pupils are fighting."

"Comments that midday supervisors and cleaners are 'women's jobs.'"

"Boys are allowed to push, shove and shout out, while girls are expected to sit quietly, do jobs and help the boys to organise their trays and equipment. Boys are praised for competitiveness, girls are praised for being kind."

"A guest speaker from a church at assembly talked about 'big strong boys' and 'pretty girls.'"

"Students are encouraged to do their 'gender' sports with boys playing football and girls netball."

"Girls are awarded house points for tidying up, organising resources, sorting books. Boys are given house points for making the teacher laugh, managing to throw their waste paper into a bin or throwing their shoes on to the roof."

"A pupil told me I couldn't use power tools because I was a woman. Male pupils have told me I was overreacting and being too emotional despite acting and using the same tone and strategies as male colleagues."

Nearly one in five (18%) respondents had personally experienced gender stereotyping within their school in the last five years. This often took the form of the roles staff were expected to carry out: men were expected to carry out manual tasks, women to take on caring, cleaning and catering. Men were seen as 'strong' and women 'emotional'.

"Told I couldn't be a candidate for a position as I wasn't male."

"Male students ignoring attempts to address inappropriate behaviour as middle-aged female staff are 'noise in the background.'"

"I've been asked if I'm OK to drive the new minibus which is slightly bigger than the last one. I've been asked if a male should drive it."

"The deputy head referred to our learning support assistant team as a 'bunch of mums' even though we have men in the team."

"A male teacher didn't think I'd know how to use a glue gun. I said I did know, but he didn't listen and asked another male teaching assistant to come into the class to show me."

"Pastoral care is pushed onto female staff, academic skills are given to male staff. More respect is given to male members of staff and pupils. Females are often ignored and considered emotional."

Conclusion

There remains work to do to address sexism in schools. Sexist language and gender stereotyping perpetuates the damaging ideas that boys and men are strong and stoic, suited to physical work, while girls and women are emotional and are more suited to caring, domestic roles.

It is notable that male as well as female respondents reported experiencing harmful stereotyping. However, the comments reveal that their experiences were very different. Men were often called upon to carry out physical tasks, whereas women repeatedly reported being ignored or underestimated.

The prevalence of sexual harassment, particularly in secondary schools, is extremely troubling. UNISON is calling on the next government to ensure that staff and pupils of all genders are protected from damaging sexist attitudes, language and behaviour. Staff need to know how to address these issues and that they will be taken seriously when they report their concerns.