

Women and Equalities Committee

Sub-Committee

Oral evidence: Attitudes towards women and girls in educational settings, HC 331

Tuesday 28 June 2022

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Members present: Jackie Doyle-Price (Chair); Kim Johnson and Kate Osborne.

Questions 1 - 25

Witnesses

I: Susie McDonald, Chief Executive at Tender Education & Arts, Soma Sara, Founder and CEO at Everyone's Invited and Keziah Featherstone, Headteacher at Q3 Academy Tipton.

II: Dr Yuwei Xu, Assistant Professor in Education and Teacher Development at University of Nottingham, UK, Professor Nicky Stanley, Professor of Social Work at University of Central Lancashire and Jenny Barksfield, Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Education at PSHE Association.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Susie McDonald, Soma Sara and Keziah Featherstone.

Q1 Chair: Good afternoon, this is our first oral evidence session for the Women and Equalities Committee's inquiry into attitudes towards women and girls in educational settings. This is the first of two panels today, and I will invite individual members to put their questions to you, and they will indicate to whom they want to put the question in the first instance.

Perhaps I could invite each of you to introduce yourself for the record, starting with Susie.

Susie McDonald: Hello everybody, my name is Susie McDonald, the chief executive of Tender Education & Arts, which is an arts charity focusing specifically on prevention of domestic and sexual violence in the lives of young people.

Keziah Featherstone: I am Keziah Featherstone, teacher at Q3 Academy Tipton, which is in Sandwell. I am also a member of the Headteachers' Roundtable and a founding member of WomenEd.

Soma Sara: Hello, my name is Soma Sara, and I am the founder of Everyone's Invited, which is an organisation and charity which seeks to expose and eradicate rape culture.

Q2 Chair: Thank you very much and welcome. We will be very interested to hear what you have to say to us. We started this inquiry mainly as a result of what is currently going on in the news, but last time our Committee looked at these issues, which was in 2016, we found that girls and young women consistently report high levels of sexual harassment and sexual violence in school. Why do you think this continues to be such a problem? If I could start perhaps with Keziah?

Keziah Featherstone: The culture does not change very fast. Children's education starts in the home, but it does not end there. I am a secondary school head teacher, and when they come into us they have been through 11 years of education in the home, the wider family, the community and, increasingly, online. My hope is they do not leave necessarily with the same mindsets as when they join us, and we have to work very hard at that. Some schools do not appreciate what the volume of concerns might be; we do, and we work very hard on that, but I do not think it is something you are going to be able to change in five years or 10 years, which is heart-breaking. That is why we come into this job: it is the long game, changing things over a long period of time.

I will be honest, as a teacher I have been teaching some children for quite some time how to do full stops and capital letters. They still do not do it, and that is just one small thing that they practise on a regular basis, but children's attitudes and behaviours are much harder to change, particularly when they are just in school for a short period of time.



Q3 **Chair:** Would you say it has got better or worse since 2016?

Keziah Featherstone: It has changed since lockdown, with some children being almost entirely online at that time. Mixing with people they do not know on servers that are not monitored has been very frightening for everybody who works in schools. More extreme attitudes and behaviours have been seen from some younger children when they came back in and we had to work very hard to change quite quickly, so it has changed in that it is perhaps starting younger. Quite often parents are not aware to what extent it might have taken a grip on a young person's mindset or ideology.

Q4 **Chair:** Thank you. Soma, same question: why do you think girls and young women report such high levels of sexual harassment in school?

Soma Sara: I agree with much of what has already been said in terms of how difficult it is to actually change mindset and attitudes, and how long that takes. I think we are living in a different age, with the rise in the mainstreaming of hardcore pornography and the digital revolution of the social world. Young people are conducting much of their lives online, building relationships, finding out who they are, and it is all happening online. There has been a whole host of new kinds of abuse and digital-based violence emerging in recent years.

People essentially have quicker and more immediate access to each other, and this is a really pervasive problem. Another reason might be because it has become normalised, and very much part and parcel of young people's lives. A lot of young people I have spoken to were never told and do not really understand that it is wrong, or understand the impact it is actually having on them; it is just accepted as what happens. When they have tried to report it, they have been met with invalidation and disbelief, and been told that it is not a big deal and they should just shrug it off and move on. Not being taken seriously serves to double down on perpetuating that same cycle of abuse and those experiences.

Q5 **Chair:** Thinking about the relationship between the physical environment in school and the online environment outside, and potentially inside as well, to what extent does one behaviour drive the other? Does it start in school and online is a tool? How would you characterise it, Soma?

Soma Sara: It is happening in school and online, and they are very much interconnected. The testimonies on our website reveal this is happening in school corridors and in lessons. For example, one case which shows the kind of crossover between those two experiences is students AirDropping nudes in a maths class to other students, and Google Drive is a host of non-consensually shared images. I guess school is a place where young people are socialising and getting to know each other, but then at the same time, they are also socialising outside of school, at house parties, after school—it is all very much interconnected.

It is very challenging for schools to kind of get a hold on behaviour that is happening both outside of school and also on young people's phones.



Teenagers have private lives, are independent and autonomous, and it is really difficult to monitor and know what is happening, especially online. That is why it is crucial and fundamental that we are creating safe and open environments for young people to talk about their experiences, especially online, and that we are approaching these issues in an empathetic and non-judgmental setting where they feel empowered and actually safe to share what is happening.

When we approach it with an attitude of shame and anger, we are increasing their suffering and creating an environment of hostility where they will not feel able to talk openly about what is happening to them and whether they have experienced abuse. If discussion of sex, consent, rape culture, pornography is all taboo, even just the act of having sex, then how can you expect a young person to talk about an experience of assault, abuse or violence?

Q6 Chair: On the issue of rape culture, in secondary schools particularly but also primary schools, what is the experience of young girls there?

Keziah Featherstone: This is not something that I have an awful lot of experience with. I know there are incidents in my school, nearby schools and in the schools of other people that I know, but if you ask if it is a strong culture that pervades the student body, that is not something I recognise in the schools I have worked in.

There will be incidents of racism, sexism, transphobia, bullying, and sadly some very unpleasant views and attitudes out there. It is really important that I have never stood in front of parents or a staff body and said these things do not happen here—they can happen here and anywhere. Because of that openness, and luckily having a very large pastoral team, there are an awful lot of people to pick up any concerns the minute they are raised, and we have very strong and robust safeguarding procedures at my school, but it is not something I personally recognise.

Q7 Chair: Soma, have you seen any evidence of rape culture as it affects secondary schools and primary schools?

Soma Sara: Yes, overwhelmingly so. We believe that rape culture is pervasive and is a universal problem, a societal issue. We feel that it is everywhere, in all of society, and therefore naturally it will be in all schools, primary and secondary.

If it is happening on the streets, in Parliament, in police forces, in every corner and aspect of society, these toxic beliefs of misogyny and sexism inevitably will bleed into the institutions: the universities, primary and secondary schools. We have received over 50,000 testimonies which really powerfully reflect that reality.

Q8 Chair: Do you have any particular view of whether that affects any ethnic minorities or are there any other observations you have found in your work?



Soma Sara: Yes, overwhelmingly those experiencing misogyny, abuse and sexual violence, both online and in real life, are predominantly women and girls. However, that is not to say that this does not happen to boys and men as well. Male sexual abuse is even more stigmatised and difficult to talk about, which is a huge problem and an area that needs to be looked at as well.

It is really important to understand concepts like intersectionality and understanding how different layers of oppressions can intersect and interlock to create unique experiences of discrimination. So it is about understanding concepts like sexual racism and fetishising. From the testimonies it is clear those experiences are prevalent too, and that individuals with different identities are in many ways experiencing more extreme forms of that kind of abuse, when there happens to be a layering of two different kinds of oppression.

Chair: Can I bring in my colleague Kate Osborne now, please?

Q9 **Kate Osborne:** Good afternoon. If I can direct my question to Susie, please. Can you tell us what you have observed from your work in both primary and secondary schools about the types of attitudes towards women and girls, and also the effects of sexual harassment and everyday sexism on children and young people?

Susie McDonald: What we have found is when you create a space where children and/or young people can talk about these issues, they immediately want to talk about them. As Soma said, it is really important those spaces do feel safe, that they do not feel judged, embarrassed or shamed about the attitudes they bring into that space, but it is a place where they can talk about them.

What we know is when girls begin to talk about the nature of sexual harassment, they talk about the real nuances of what that is for them, which may range from being touched in the corridor to sexualised comments, online behaviours, being looked at, or their personal space being invaded. There are lots of things that happen to them on a very regular basis and are a pattern of experiences for them. What we see in them is a sense of defeat: they do not feel able to do anything other than normalise and accept it, so they build resilience to it, and we see strong young women who manage those experiences on a daily basis.

When we talk to young men, their ability to define sexual harassment is much less nuanced. They may often talk about the notion of rape if they are asked to define sexual harassment, which they define as a stranger jumping out of a bush and attacking a woman on a dark night and is not how they perceive themselves. They do not perceive their behaviour as being anything other than fine and acceptable, not realising that it actually needs to be reflected on and challenged. What we want to ensure is that boys and young men can inhabit that space and have these conversations to understand the definitions and the nuances of what sexual violence and sexual harassment look like, and what is acceptable



behaviour, and the impact that their behaviour has on girls and women around them, so that before any unpleasant or inappropriate behaviour begins to escalate, they have the opportunity to stop and consider their own behaviour.

Q10 Kate Osborne: You talked there about their own behaviours and what they might recognise, but how do both boys and girls demonstrate negative attitudes themselves towards women and girls?

Susie McDonald: If it was as simple as boys have negative attitudes and girls do not, then perhaps this would be slightly easier to unpick. Ultimately, sexual harassment of girls and women is held partly accountable in the lives of girls and women. When an issue of sexual harassment happens, often the girl or the young woman it happens to is held accountable for that: she should not have been walking in that street; she should have worn her skirt at the correct length that the school requires her to; she should not have walked down that corridor; she should not be friends with that group of boys. While girls are held accountable for the experiences that they have, we have a lot of work to do to make sure that the notion of what is happening is held accountable by the boys.

Unfortunately, because there is not clear guidance for schools about how to manage these incidents—they obviously want to support and take care of the boys as much as they do the girls—if a boy is an alleged perpetrator, that is a really difficult label to attach. Then, if the police come in and investigate the situation and say, “Actually there is not a criminal case to take forward”, there can be an assumption that therefore the behaviour was not inappropriate because it was not a crime, therefore the boy's behaviour is overlooked. Actually, the boy should be held accountable, and both they and the people around them need to understand what is acceptable and appropriate, and there needs to be the right support for them, without criminalising them or condemning them. But holding them accountable is really important.

Q11 Kim Johnson: Good afternoon panel, my first question is to Keziah. How well equipped are schools to implement the Government's safeguarding guidance relevant to sexual violence and sexual harassment in schools, particularly around teachers, and whether teachers are adequately trained and experienced?

Keziah Featherstone: It depends on the school and the resources to hand. You cannot have enough time or people. I am very lucky that I am working for a trust that makes those resources available to me. I do quite quickly run out of time for training because, to be honest, with the best will in the world I can put 150 staff in the hall and talk to them for an hour, but it will not necessarily impact what they do day to day when a matter arises, or whether they teach a subject in a particular way, or what should happen if something arises.



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Not all schools have all the resources I have. I am quite well resourced, but I think there are an awful lot of schools that just do not have any time. It could be that your head of year is a teaching head of year, and maybe they have an extra two hours a week, which is no time to deal with anything. I have two non-teaching adults on every year group, plus one other person working with them on their learning. I know I am quite lucky in that, but it costs a lot of money—£250,000 in salaries—and there are other people who also come into that. If you could guarantee it, it would be brilliant.

External support and advice is essential. I am in Sandwell, and the Women's Aid there is brilliant. If you have something that is tricky and you need some advice on it, I have lots of people that we can go to but those people are overwhelmed. If there are really good people in-house and also really good sources of support externally, it is good. I have been a head in a city other than where I am currently a head now, and when I went to the Women's Aid there they went, "No, we don't do that," so it is very localised.

Q12 Kim Johnson: You started by raising a quite important point about changing attitudes, and particularly that level of understanding. Susie just made a point in terms of perpetrators not understanding what rape is, and it is about having the time and expertise to be able to do some of that work.

Keziah Featherstone: It is really important because schools are very concerned about reputational damage. If something negative happens and people get to find out about it, then you are not going to have parents wanting to send their child to your school. This in turn would impact on results, and we talk about the quality of children, which is an appalling thing to say, but it is very difficult. You just have to not really care about that; you have to genuinely care about the children and their well-being, not just while they are in your building but also outside, and then the adults that they will become.

I am quite lucky, my own 15-year-old daughter comes to my school. I have a very close ear to the ground about what is happening, and therefore there are things that I can pick up and address very quickly. I do not think every head of school can send their child to their own school just as a bit of a spy, but it really does help.

Q13 Kim Johnson: Susie, how well do you think primary schools can implement Government guidance?

Susie McDonald: As with secondary schools it is really difficult and there could be much clearer guidance about keeping children safe in education. There are lots of "shoulds" and "woulds" rather than "musts", and little detail about what to do not just for the victim, but for the alleged perpetrator. There has to be equal focus on that and support for schools in terms of engaging with parents.



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Generally, a school's safeguarding lead will be the person that gets in touch with a family to say, "Your daughter or your son is involved in this incident." That is really hard for teachers to manage, and of course parents or carers are often very surprised by that. The role schools play in supporting girls is fairly straightforward in terms of external agencies being able to support them and perhaps looking at where they exist within the class or whether the perpetrator can be moved from the class. They are making waves with that, but in terms of supporting the young man who is the alleged perpetrator, schools could really do with more support. Again, I go back to the idea that, if there is not going to be a criminal case, what do you do with that young man, because his behaviour is still inappropriate, it is just not criminal? Echoing what Keziah said about primary schools, it is about giving schools more time to be able to have really robust whole staff training and manage situations, so that addressing attitudes towards violence against women and girls really explicitly does happen.

Q14 Kim Johnson: My next question is to Soma. What would you recommend to policy makers to help schools a) carry out their safeguarding responsibilities and b) effectively address negative attitudes towards women and girls? If you had the key policymakers in this room now, what would you say to them?

Soma Sara: It is really important that we are listening to what schools actually want and what they need. In my own conversations I have also been hearing that the guidance is not very clear. Funding is another really big issue, and schools are really struggling in terms of being able to provide basic teacher training in this area. This is a real problem because a lot of the teachers that are dealing with this are just not well equipped. They are not educated and do not have a comprehensive understanding of the different behaviours within a rape culture and how to deal with allegations. Even just sex education in general is not often being taught properly and well. It really needs to be delivered with a deep understanding. Teachers basically need to have confidence in the material and also to be able to be really sensitive in whether or not they are triggering people in delivering it as well; so funding is a huge area.

There should also be more of a centralised response to this issue too, as schools and institutions in this country are really autonomous and independent. Time and time again I hear the Department for Education should be doing more, as schools really want more clarification and guidance in this area.

Q15 Kim Johnson: Soma, can I just ask whether you are aware of any teacher training establishments that are looking specifically at these issues, which could be identified as an example of good practice?

Soma Sara: There are lots of different organisations that provide this teacher training. One example is the School of Sexuality Education, which is really good. It is just really important to prioritise the issue generally.



Keziah Featherstone: Ofsted do not inspect very often—which I am quite pleased about, though I am expecting them—but I would like to make a plea for decoupling safeguarding from the main inspection framework and having a yearly safeguarding audit, which would mean that every school would have to be visited every single year in the same way as for our finances. Every school would get a visit every year to look at how well they are looking after their children, rather than not being seen for 12 years, as I know is the situation with schools near me.

Kim Johnson: Thanks, Keziah. Those are all my questions, thank you, Chair.

Chair: That is a very constructive suggestion to end on, so thank you. I am sorry we have had to truncate your questions, but we are quite pressured for time this afternoon. We really welcomed hearing your evidence, and we will be following up. By all means, if there is anything else you want to say, please do let us know. Thank you very much indeed.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Yuwei Xu, Professor Nicky Stanley and Jenny Barksfield.

Q16 **Chair:** We are now on to our second panel, and we have two panellists joining us on screen and one physically. I would like to invite you all to introduce yourselves for the record. If I could start with you, Jenny?

Jenny Barksfield: I am Jenny Barksfield, deputy chief executive and director of education at the PSHE Association, the national body for PSHE education, which is a subject that includes relationships and sex education.

Professor Stanley: Hello, my name is Nicky Stanley, I am professor of social work at the University of Central Lancashire. My research addresses the prevention of violence and harm in children's lives, including evaluating school-based prevention programmes.

Chair: Thank you. Finally, I hope I say this correctly, Dr Yuwei Xu.

Q17 **Dr Xu:** Yes, correct, thank you. Hello, everyone. My name is Yuwei Xu, I work as an assistant professor at the School of Education at the University of Nottingham. My research focuses on gender and early childhood studies, with a particular interest in how children below six years old actively participate in understanding gender and in creating gender norms, and also on gender-sensitive teacher training.

Q18 **Chair:** Thank you. To move on to the questions, we are really interested in the whole area of relationships and sex education, and how that can be used to really get a healthier environment for girls in schools.

If I could perhaps start with you, Jenny, does the new RSHE Curriculum a) adequately address and challenge traditional gender stereotypes, and



b) educate and challenge girls throughout schools about violence against women and girls?

Jenny Barksfield: Obviously the statutory content for RSHE came in in September 2020, at a very difficult time for schools, and we are in the early stages of embedding it. It goes a fair way, and when taught well it allows schools to cover the topics really well. Some schools are much further ahead than others, both in their implementation and in the quality of their provision. The statutory guidance certainly includes knowledge content relevant to this, particularly around the teaching of consent, which is obviously key to a lot of this—things like sending nudes, sexual harassment, recognising abuse and so on.

What we aim to do through our materials for schools is to add into that a lot of the skills and personal attributes that young people need to develop to properly implement their knowledge. At the moment we are working on a lot of additional resources to support schools that do meet the statutory requirements, but to give them additional material around teaching about consent, the sending of nudes, recognising abuse, the effects of pornography and so on.

It is really important that starts from the beginning of primary, obviously in an age appropriate way. We just recently published lessons on teaching about consent for primary school, which sometimes makes people think, “Gosh”, but actually it is not about sex, it is about asking to take someone's toy, so it is important it is done in an age appropriate way.

We are seeing signs of progress in schools but, because the last two years have been so difficult, it is taking a while for this to become something that schools are prioritising. It really helps that we have recently had increasing recognition from Government through the latest version of “Keeping children safe in education”, which acknowledges that schools should teach this through regularly timetabled lessons. This is the first time that has been said in such a powerful way, which is fantastic. We have the Ofsted review of sexual harassment in schools, which has been incredibly helpful in calling for regular, well-planned curriculum time for RSHE. Every time there is a mention like that from Government, Ofsted, or whoever it may be, it supports schools and almost gives them permission to dedicate the time they need, which they might have wanted to do before but did not necessarily feel justified in doing because of all the other time pressures in school.

We are going in the right direction, there is plenty more to do, but that was probably a very long-winded way of saying we are gradually getting there; there is a way to go, but we are on the right track.

Q19 **Chair:** That is very helpful. Nicky, would you like to address the same question? Is the new RSHE curriculum sufficient, both in terms of gender stereotypes and violence against women?



Professor Stanley: Well, schools need to take gender equality as the starting point for planning and delivering RE, and that point is not really sufficiently prominent in the guidance at present.

The guidance clearly states that in both primary and secondary schools, children should be taught the knowledge they need to recognise and report different forms of abuse. This involves approaching children as potential victims and encouraging them to take action to protect themselves. This guidance is useful and helpful, but it is not enough as it does not tackle the fact that some children and young people may already be using controlling and abusive behaviour themselves, which is a sad fact that we mentioned earlier.

We also need to recognise that the majority of severe forms of interpersonal harm and abuse are perpetrated by boys and young men, and there is a real need for teaching on this in order to engage fully with boys and young men. Our recent TESSE study, which evaluated a National UK-wide prevention programme delivered in primary schools for children aged six to 11, interestingly found that girls benefitted more from the programme than boys, they did so consistently, and they were more likely to retain the learning than boys.

Programmes need to do more to reach out and to grip and engage with boys. We know that boys will not engage if they are feeling blamed or put on the spot, so it is important to avoid doing that. We need to be working alongside boys who need to be providing their views to programme developers about what would be meaningful to them, what would talk to them. Also, boys themselves talk about the need for more male teachers and facilitators to deliver this material, and male role models are helpful in this respect.

I want to talk briefly about pornography because we also know it is adolescent boys who are the regular viewers of pornography. In our European study, we found that about a third of boys aged 14 to 17 in England were regularly viewing online pornography. That was a few years ago; goodness only knows what has been happening under lockdown where, as people have been saying, boys have been shut in their rooms with nothing but their computers for company. Our research found a very clear association between regular viewing of online pornography and the use of coercive and violent sexual behaviour. Those were also the same young men who were most likely to have negative attitudes on gender equality. For example, they were likely to agree with statements such as, "Women lead men on sexually and then complain when they get attention."

Pornography is a major problem that has infiltrated mainstream culture. Some argue that, particularly for boys, pornography has filled the gap left by inadequate sex education in the past. However, I certainly think there is cause for hope. What we have now is the most digitally savvy generation of young people we have ever had, who can readily critique



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the media, and can be taught to identify the gap between pornography and the reality of sexual relationships. The extent to which pornography is perceived as realistic has been shown to mediate its impact on sexual behaviour. They can also be taught to challenge the misogynistic values embedded in pornography.

This is a challenging and complex task for teachers, and maybe someone else would like to talk about the difficulties for teachers in doing this, which is not an easy thing to ask of them. They do need a lot of training, and I would like to see more of that happening at the qualifying level. I will stop there for a bit.

Q20 Chair: Thank you, lots of food for thought there, too. I just want to comment on one of the things that you said which struck a chord with me: that we are approaching this from the perspective of seeing potential victims. Certainly, when I voted for RSE to be put in the curriculum, for me it was all about empowerment and respect. Has that been lost in translation? If I perhaps ask Nicky first, and then Jenny for observations on that.

Professor Stanley: No, that is not completely lost in translation, and some programmes and interventions do that better than others. There is now a wealth of material out there, and teachers may need support and guidance in thinking about which to choose. Engaging the interest of boys is a real challenge for these programmes, particularly with what we know about the rate of boys' learning on these matters.

Jenny Barksfield: You are asking about whether we have lost sight of the balance of equality and respect in RSE. A good RSE teacher comes at the topic from lots of approaches. All PSHE education is based on understanding, respect, equality and so on, in whatever topic you are talking about, whether it is discrimination or sex education.

Nicky has touched on several issues that I absolutely would concur with. There being gender differences, we try to teach everything in as inclusive a way as possible, but where there are gender differences in experience and impact, it is important we address those, but not in a way that makes boys feel we are saying all boys are perpetrators. That does take very careful handling and distancing so it is not personalised. Also, teachers need to understand that PSHE, RSHE, is not therapy—they are not in a sort of group therapy session. It is a curriculum subject and is the universal provision; there may be targeted interventions for certain young people, but this is universal education for children and young people, and it needs to be done carefully.

There is definitely a need for more teacher training although we train as many teachers as we can, but most teachers qualify having had little or no preparation for teaching any of RSHE or PSHE in their initial teacher education. We are constantly playing catch-up after teachers qualify so we are increasingly trying to work more and more with initial teacher training providers on this because we obviously do a lot of surveys of



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members and the things that worry teachers most are teaching about sex, consent, sexting. These are things teachers constantly want help and support with, and there is a huge fear of getting it wrong, which is understandable. We know it is a subject that, if it is not done properly, can do more harm than good, and we certainly do not want that. We have a big focus on supporting teachers, not only with writing resources but with educating them in how to teach it safely, which is crucial.

Chair: Thank you. I will now bring in my colleague Kim, to ask some questions about gender generally.

Q21 **Kim Johnson:** Thank you, Chair. My question is to Dr Xu. Can you tell us how early in their development children develop and reproduce understanding of gender stereotypes?

Dr Xu: Thanks for this question. From my research, I found even younger children aged two have already started to engage with gender issues. For example, they will police each other by saying, "Boys cannot sit on a pink chair," or, if they are grouped after school waiting to be picked up by their parents, I have heard boys asking other boys to, "Come over here, this is a boy zone and that is a girl zone," asking the boys not to sit with the girls.

Also in my research, I asked younger children aged three to six to think about who plays football and what boys and girls do, and they have said things like, "Girls don't play football, girls wear high heels and go shopping." Lots of those examples and evidence have suggested that even younger children have already started to engage with gender stereotypes, and even sometimes sexualised issues. For example, this case was from China, but I have heard a girl saying to me and pointing to another boy, that she wants to only play with this boy because he is handsome, rich and she will marry someone like him in the future.

I have also heard girls aged four to five in this country, when they are sent into an early years setting by their mothers, going up to a male teacher in the classroom and telling him that they are dressed up beautifully today, to get praise from that particular male teacher. There are those nuanced issues when sexuality education and sexuality related issues emerge in the early years settings and contexts, which are oftentimes ignored in many circumstances, so that is my initial response to your question.

Q22 **Kim Johnson:** They reproduce gender stereotypes at quite an early age then, Dr Xu. What do you think could be done within early education to maybe challenge some of those perceptions?

Dr Xu: Pretty much what other colleagues have already said. For example, in the early years foundation stage statutory framework and other frameworks in Scotland and Wales, we have not really mentioned gender as an issue. There is mention of equality, and giving children all the opportunities, but there is not explicit mention of challenging gender



stereotypes in those frameworks, with the exception of Northern Ireland; their 2013 framework mentioned this. The first thing is to perhaps think about whether those statutory frameworks need to embed that aspect.

Linking that to what other people have said about teacher education, a Fawcett Society review in 2019 found that we do not have any gender-related curriculum in our initial teacher training courses for early years practitioners or pre-service early years practitioners. My research has found a lot about how teachers or practitioners, either consciously or unconsciously, bring in their own gendered stereotypes and understandings into early years settings, and interact with boys and girls differently because of their own gendered experiences or understanding. There is definitely a need to raise those issues and to focus on teacher training as such.

My other point is about intersectionality, which the previous panel also raised. My research has found many of those issues are related to parental engagement, and how those children bring an already gendered understanding that they may get from their parents or other families and communities into early years settings. Oftentimes, this relates to other social issues such as poverty, unemployment, girlhood pregnancy, religious issues and other aspects. These issues need to be understood in an intersectional way, to realise this is not just a gender or a sexuality issue, but it also relates to other social factors such as race, ethnicity, social class and religion, so that is another aspect.

A final thing that was I was intrigued by in Nicky's answer just now was about men's participation in early childhood education. There is much mention of encouraging more men to work in early childhood education internationally, as recommended by the "Good Practice for Good Jobs in Early Childhood Education and Care" report by the United Nations, and in this country, where there is an initiative called Men In The Early Years, which encourages having male role models for boys, and to also have males challenging the stereotype that boys and men do not do caring jobs. This is not to say we do not welcome men to work in early years settings or any child-related childcare settings. However, there is a need for caution here, as I have also found in my research that not just the men but also women teachers are both likely to bring in their gendered stereotypes and to reproduce those gendered norms.

The focus of my research is to understand how those teachers developed their own gendered understanding that is linked to whether they are a man or woman, but more importantly to understand what their thinking and understanding of gender is, which is beyond the issue of the gender of teachers or practitioners.

Kim Johnson: Thank you so much of your responses, Dr Xu; those are all my questions.

Q23 Chair: Thank you. We are going to have to wind up because I know one of my colleagues needs to leave. Just to just to finish off, I want to invite



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each of you to give me your final answer as to what your main recommendation would be for the Government to do to further support schools in improving attitudes towards women and girls. Could you just give me a quick answer to that, and then if there is anything else you would like to give to us after this meeting, please do feel free to write to us. Can I start with Jenny?

Jenny Barksfield: As I was saying earlier, anything Government can do to facilitate schools to get it right, such as encouraging sufficient time on the timetable. I know schools are very pressed and it can be hard to find time, but this does not work if it is done through assemblies and off-timetable days, once a term, it has to be regular timetabled lessons.

Supporting training for teachers particularly in initial teacher education is absolutely crucial; we cannot do it without that. Continuing providing guidance and high quality resources; there is an awful lot out there that is not of high quality. We need to ensure schools are only using safe resources and safe visitors and so on, and also continuing, as Ofsted are doing, to just keep the spotlight on this.

The spotlight is on RSHE and particularly RSE more than it ever has been before, and that is all good. My fear is that it has its moment in the spotlight, and then it is, "Oh well, we've done that, we've sorted it, we don't need to worry about it anymore, job done," and we still have a long way to go, so I hope that that continues to be the case.

Q24 **Chair:** We would concur with that. Nicky?

Professor Stanley: I would just like to emphasise the importance of the whole school approach, and I wonder if Ofsted could be doing more to promote that. Our TESSE study in primary schools I referred to found an important association between children's positive evaluations of a school's culture and the impact of the programme. Schools where staff were perceived as caring, where children felt they could ask for help and expected to receive it, where school rules were thought to be fair, where children were proud of their school—these were the schools where children were most likely to benefit from SRE teaching. We need to think in terms of whole school approaches: schools which recognise pupils' dignity across all aspects of school life, which actively foster gender equality right across the curriculum, and where adults are perceived by children to care for and about them.

Q25 **Chair:** Thank you. Finally, Dr Xu.

Dr Xu: My suggestion is what I have already mentioned about gender-sensitive teacher training that makes teachers and practitioners reflect on how gender affects interactions in schools and early years centres, and how gender affects children's experiences.

Part of that gender-sensitive teacher training is also to actively support teachers to work with children and parents as active agents of change: to recognise that children themselves, even at the very early stages of their



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life and in their younger ages, are active producers and participants in their society, in their own life and in the issues of gender and sexuality. We need to support teachers to recognise that, and learn to empower and involve children as part of their gender-sensitive teacher training programme.

Chair: Thank you to all of you for your evidence this afternoon. I am sorry we had to truncate the session somewhat, but you have given us plenty in that short session to think about. Please do follow up with any written evidence about anything you think we did not touch today or anything else you want to offer. In the meantime, thank you again. That concludes our evidence session.