



## INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY: BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE SCHOOL - FREE FROM SEXISM AND MISOGYNY



*Teacher of English and Media, Kelly Cragg, shares the steps she's taken to tackle misogyny in Leicestershire 11-16 school, The Cedars Academy, to move a little closer towards a world free of bias and discrimination.*

The worldwide celebration this month of 'International Women's Day' reminds us to reflect on not only the amazing progress and accomplishments of women, but also to consider where we as a global society still have some work to do. Actress Emma Watson addressed one suggested area of improvement in a speech for the UN. She said, "It is time we see gender as a spectrum instead of two sets of opposing ideals." She is exactly right; now more than ever we are seeing conflict in society as a result of clashes in these ideals - fuelled by a torrent of misinformation on social media - meaning society is becoming more polarised than inclusive.

This International Women's Day the focus is on inclusion and imagining a world free of bias, stereotyping and discrimination. Imagining that world, for me, seems pretty difficult as it is so far removed from the world we live in. Unfortunately, stereotypes hold much more power than we realise. Over the last 2 years I have been on a mission to challenge sexism and misogyny at the Leicestershire school where I teach, and as the campaign has developed and the more and more research I carried out into the topic,

I've concluded that much of the issue lies with boys and stereotyping.

I appreciate the irony of blogging about International Women's Day and tackling misogyny, yet starting with talking about boys exclusively, but hear me out...

Now, more than ever, our boys are facing difficult challenges in their lives - most significantly the male mental health crisis and terrifying suicide rates amongst British men. Add on top of this the immense social media influence, with algorithms targeting young men with largely toxic messaging about masculinity. Then mix in the negative portrayal men have in the media following movements like 'Me Too', and we have some very confused and scared young boys in our care. Where do they turn to for answers? All too often it's Influencers like Tate unfortunately, whose key messaging is to reassert the stereotypes of masculinity that society has been trying to dismantle for years. Stereotypes like, 'Men must be strong' and show 'no emotion' or 'weakness'. They are told they must be 'providers' and be 'wealthy'. That they must



be 'tough' and 'physically strong'. However, most of our boys do not fit into these cookie-cutter ideals, and this can lead to feelings of frustration and anger. Now, where does this frustration and anger go? Low self-esteem? Mental health disorders? Poor behaviour and rejection of education? Criminal behaviour? Sexism? Misogyny? Do you now see where I'm going?

We must address these issues with our boys with sympathy and understanding so they realise that their feelings of frustration and anger are valid, but that these feelings are due to the residues of the patriarchy (and it's still working minions) and not the fault of women/Feminism (as many of them believe). By doing this we have a good starting point to begin tackling the issue of sexism and misogyny in schools. And this is not an easy task; schools are microcosms for wider society. If the various waves of Feminism over the last 100 years have failed to establish equality in society, we are not going to be able to 'fix' the issue in school. However, there are steps we can take.

At The Cedars Academy, we've employed a range of effective strategies that have helped shift the culture among students with regards to sexism and misogyny, that could all be easily adaptable in other settings.

### Suggestions for tackling misogyny and sexism in schools:

- **Be clear in ALL messaging that this is not an attack on the boys.** The second the boys feel like they are made to feel shamed or blamed for the behaviour of 'men' we lose them. Be very clear in the wording and messaging to avoid this. Address their struggles and insecurities and acknowledge WHY they feel like this – it is not the fault of women, but the legacy of a patriarchal society of which they are picking up the pieces
- **Educate students on exactly what sexual harassment, sexual assault and sexual violence means.** Have a strict ZERO TOLERANCE stance on ANY examples of this. Give harsh sanctions, and ensure they understand exactly WHY this was not okay. Be clear that they know this behaviour is a criminal offence and what the real-world implications of such behaviour are. Do not just stick them in detention; take the time to offer that conversation so they understand
- **Consider uniform policies.** Move the focus away from skirt length in uniform policies. Think about what is that actually achieving? What is this caveat for? Firstly, it humiliates our girls. Imagine for a second being lined up every morning when you get to work and having an adult inspect your body and publicly pass judgement on whether you look 'appropriate'? Traumatizing. It is no wonder they rebel. Often this rebellion is a reaction to the injustice they feel, yet they don't quite understand

what that injustice is. This focus on skirt length is teaching them that their bodies are sexualised and that they must 'cover up'. The issue of skirts may seem minor to some in the grand scheme of things, but in reality it is a misogynistic policy which shames girl for their bodies. It feeds into wider societal issues, whereby girls are victim blamed in cases of assault for what they are wearing. 'You were asking for it dressed like that!'. We need to be empowering our girls to know that they are more than their bodies, and that if it 'distracts the boys' – as is a common argument for knee length skirts – the issue there is with the boys and not the victim of their sexualised gaze. Any uniform policy should remove mention of gender; treat boys and girls equally. For ALL genders, instruct them they should not be revealing underwear, but for the reason of maintaining privacy and dignity – not to 'cover up'

- **Offer opportunities for the girls to be empowered.** Perhaps they could form a working party to look at ways to tackle sexism and misogyny. Or they could create poster campaigns or SMSC lessons. This can be incredibly powerful. During The Cedars' 2023 Ofsted Inspection, the inspector wanted to speak to 6 of our female students, having heard about the work we had been doing, and was floored by their discussion where they confidently talked about their experiences and how empowered they have been in helping to tackle the issue at school. It was clear the messages we are teaching them will carry on throughout their lives. This can be a powerful tool in shifting the culture – not just in school, but in society
- **Do not bombard students with this messaging** – little and often. Enough to keep the conversation going

This list is by no means going to solve the issues with sexism and misogyny in schools...but every journey begins with a step. We have shared our experiences and encouraged our fellow Lionheart Educational Trust schools to take that step and "Inspire Inclusion". We'd encourage other schools across the UK to do that too. Let's empower our girls to stand up to inequality. Let's treat our boys with empathy and understanding of their struggles in the modern world, but also let's hold them to account when they misstep. Let's address those stereotypes and challenge those biases. Then we will start to see progress.

Finally, don't forget that International Women's Day is important not only to address gender inequality, but also to celebrate women. Be sure to thank the women in your lives for their inspiring work, attitude, behaviour, values and support.

**#InternationalWomensDay**  
**#InspireInclusion**  
**#EveryJourneyBeginsWithAStep**