

Researchers: Extreme views about women are infiltrating Australian schools—we need a zero-tolerance response

May 10 2024, by Stephanie Wescott and Steven Roberts



Schools should start plainly calling out gendered violence against women and girls. Credit: [Zen Chung/ Pexels](#), [CC BY](#)

Earlier this week, two students [were expelled](#) from a Melbourne private school for their involvement in creating a spreadsheet that ranked girls using sexist and violent categories (from "wifeys" and "cuties" to "unrapeable").

There has been a necessary focus on the school and its response and [significant community outrage](#) about the actions of the young men involved. But this incident is not an isolated one.

Our [ongoing research](#) has found sexism, sexual harassment and misogyny are rife in Australian schools.

This is influenced by the rise in popularity and ubiquity of figures from the "manosphere" (an overlapping collection of extreme men's communities that are anti-women and against women's empowerment) on social media. This includes Andrew Tate, the "[misogynist influencer](#)" who is [facing trial](#) in Romania on charges of human trafficking and rape ([which he denies](#)).

At the same time, Australia is confronting shockingly high rates of violence against women. Last week, the federal government announced a range of measures to respond to the crisis and quell the public's understandable anger.

Although the package contains measures aimed at preventing [young people](#) being exposed to misogynistic content online, it largely overlooks the crucial [role of education in tackling sexist attitudes](#) that enable and drive the current high rates of violence. To make real change, schools must be included.

Our research on schools and Andrew Tate

Our [research](#) explores the influence of anti-women and anti-feminist online figures such as Tate on boys' behavior and attitudes towards women in Australian schools.

In mid-2023, we interviewed 30 women teachers working in schools across the country. The women described a sharp increases in sexism, misogyny and sexual harassment in their classrooms.

Teachers also identified the explicit influence of Tate on their students' attitudes and behaviors. This included setting images of Tate as their computer desktop backgrounds, provoking teachers with Tate's ideas (for example, asking teachers whether they agree women shouldn't be allowed to drive), and using his [body language](#) (such as a [hand gesture](#) he often displays when photographed).

One [teacher](#) spoke of the transformation of a student she had known for several years:

"I taught [a] boy in Year 7 and he was a wholesome, creative [child]. This boy does dance competitions and is in a dance troop and is always polite to me [...] and yet is [now] writing these disturbingly misogynistic messages, literally saying, 'No, Andrew Tate is being vilified. He's in the right.' I'm like, who is that boy? That's not the boy that I've seen for the last couple of years."

The response needs to be urgent

This is happening within a broader [culture of backlash](#) to gender justice gains achieved via feminist activism—including the #metoo movement. Teachers in our study said their students believe women have achieved unequal power over men.

Despite these worrying trends and teachers requesting help from school management, the women we spoke to [reported](#) schools were not responding in a meaningful or urgent way.

Our study findings have been echoed by an April 2024 survey of Adelaide school teachers, who described how misogynist language and physical intimidation are commonplace in their schools. They are also part of a [much longer history of research](#) showing an ongoing culture of sexism in Australian schools.

We need a national campaign...

If we are serious about changing the way our culture sees and treats women, we need to view schools as sites of primary prevention. This means they are places where we intervene to help stop the problem of gendered violence happening in the first place.

First, we need the federal government to lead a national campaign calling for a zero-tolerance approach to violence against women and girls in schools. It needs to [specifically use](#) the words "sexism," "misogyny" and "violence against women."

In [our research](#) teachers reported their schools will often stay away from using such language. Instead, "disrespect" or other ways of classifying this behavior are used to explain what are obviously sexist incidents. This reluctance could be due to fears of controversy.

But this risks reducing the problem to simply being about individual behavior and takes gender out of it. Naming and confronting sexism directly can be the first step in creating safer and more inclusive learning environments for women, girls and gender-diverse people in schools.

...and national guidelines

Second, we need national, consistent guidelines and advice for schools on how to respond to incidents of sexism, sexual harassment and misogyny.

At the moment, it is largely left up to schools to handle this and teachers are telling us they are falling short. With all the other pressures schools are under, clearly they need more support and guidance to respond to incidents adequately.

Other researchers have also suggested a national code of conduct for sexism and [sexual harassment](#) in schools with reporting guidelines.

This would ensure consistent approaches to incidents, give us a clearer picture of what is happening, and allow us to tell when things start to improve.

We also need more education

Third, respectful relationships education should be mandatory across all Australian schools.

Although it is mentioned in [the Australian Curriculum](#), it is up to states and territories to decide how it is delivered. Even though respectful relationships is mandatory in Victorian government schools, teachers in our study described its presence in their schools as diluted. They said they would like to see it expanded.

The messages and attitudes should also be implemented [across the whole school](#), including in school policies, school leadership and teaching approaches. This means there is greater recognition of schools as safe

workplaces, places for learning and parts of the community.

Australia is in the grips of a national crisis of violence against women. Schools, as microcosms of broader society, deserve much more meaningful, long-term interventions to contribute to a change that is urgently needed.

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