

# 'Not my boy.' When teachers are harassed by students, some schools and parents fail to help

August 21 2024, by Samantha Schulz and Sarah McDonald

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Since the start of this school year, we have been surveying teachers in South Australia about sexist views among students. This is part of our

research into how online worlds are shaping Australian schooling.

In May, we reported the first round of our research. We found South Australian teachers were experiencing a rise in sexist and other anti-social views among students, similar to those reported [interstate](#) and [overseas](#).

Teachers in our as yet unpublished study spoke of an alarming increase in misogynistic, homophobic, racist, and sexist language and behaviors, mostly by boys and young men targeting girls and young female teachers. This is prompting some women [to leave the profession](#).

A new theme to emerge from our research is bystander inaction. This is when [school leaders](#), other teachers, or parents downplay what is happening or do nothing or little in response.

## **Our study**

Between February and May this year, we advertised an [anonymous survey](#) on the Teachers of Adelaide Facebook group. This involves teachers from public, private co-ed and single-sex schools.

The survey called for short-answer responses to questions about sexism, racism, homophobia or other anti-social behaviors and language.

We received 160 responses. Almost 80% of the responses were from female teachers, who were mostly from high schools. On top of this, we did ten interviews with teachers who responded, who were willing to talk at further length.

## **Teachers are not prepared to help**

Some [female teachers](#) in our study experienced abuse and harassment by students when they were on their own. But it sometimes occurred around other female staff or teachers.

One female teacher who has been in the profession for 14 years told us how a Year 11 boy backed her into a corner of the staff room. "And the other staff members, they didn't know what to do because he was stronger than all of us."

Other teachers spoke about how they had no training or preparation to deal with this kind of behavior. One female teacher said, "I don't think my teaching degree prepared me for any of this [...]. It was a bit of a culture shock going into a school."

Another female teacher said [teacher education](#) and [professional development](#) did not acknowledge "you could possibly be the victim of sexual harassment as a teacher." She added "that really pisses me off to be honest."

## **It's different for male teachers**

A male interviewee described stepping into a senior high school classroom after the female teacher for that class had resigned due to the behavior of male students. "She was having sexually suggestive things said to her by her students and it was not really dealt with appropriately. And she got to the point where she felt sick even thinking about coming to work [...]."

But as this male teacher explained, male students did not treat him the same way. "So, I just walk into the room, and they're like, yeah, that's the [...] authority figure. It's a man."

Other male teachers said gender-based harassment and abuse was too big

an issue for them to tackle as part of their already busy and complex jobs. As one told us: "The scale of the problem is too big, and it's really tangential as far as our duties go."

## **School leaders are not helping**

Female teachers are telling us some school leaders (which include principals and deputy principals) are not treating these issues seriously.

In one school, a female teacher left after being told by students as young as Year 7 she "looked like a porn star." A female colleague told us how she told the principal that she was being sexually harassed, the principal just said, "Well, just because you said it's harassment, it doesn't necessarily mean it is."

Other respondents talked about a "hush hush" response from schools when teachers left due to student behavior. "Anything that's challenging, [the principal is] like, 'No, we're not discussing that. I'll have a discussion in private with you.'"

In other industries—where the harassment of women has been ignored or covered up—this has been referred to as "[institutional gaslighting](#)."

## **Parents are ignoring warnings**

When there is a behavioral issue with a [student](#), one of the first steps a teacher can take is to talk to the parents. But teachers in our study said parents often did not believe their sons could behave this way. As one female teacher described it, there is "a lot of eye rolling like, I can't believe you're treating this as an issue."

Another female teacher told us, "Usually I get the response from the

parent, 'Not my boy. My boy would not do that. My boy would not have those values.'"

The same teacher continued, "I'm just wondering how many parents really know their sons and have been prepared to sit down and talk about consent with their children, have been prepared to sit down and talk about respect with their children?"

## What can we do?

Bystander inaction to harassment and abuse of women and girls [is not new](#). Research shows it [thrives within cultures and systems](#) where there is poor understanding of gender equity and little recognition, we are all responsible for preventing or responding to this behavior.

In Australia, we have a decades' long [policy vacuum](#) around gender equity in schooling. So our systems are ill-equipped and reluctant to deal with this issue, despite warnings, schools are becoming breeding grounds for [gender-based violence](#) and teachers are leaving.

We now have mandatory consent education, but as our research indicates, this is not being delivered consistently or effectively across schools.

Education around gender must be part of teaching degrees and a central component of the Australian Curriculum. And all of us in the community—including parents—need to take responsibility for the way men and boys treat women and girls.

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