

# ***An inclusive culture: challenging homophobic and sexist bullying***

"They play with a pack of cards, and one card is the gay card. Whoever ends up with the card is the 'gay boy' for the day. These boys are nine years old."

**Primary school teacher, Sussex**

Extract from *Homophobic Bullying*, Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007.

A harmless joke? A trivial matter? Boys being boys? If the card had been assigned a racist term, would we think differently about this incident?

Half of all teachers do not challenge homophobic language when they hear it. The reasons for this are varied, but combined they contribute to a wide-ranging conspiracy of silence. As a result, homophobia remains a pervasive and persistent problem within our society, including in our schools and colleges.

In July this year, the charity Stonewall published *The School Report*, which documents the experiences of over 1,100 lesbian, gay and bisexual pupils in Britain's schools. The report notes that almost two thirds of young lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) pupils at secondary school have experienced homophobic bullying.

ATL believes that homophobia and homophobic bullying affects everyone. It is part of a wider culture that encourages particular stereotypes of men and women. In order to challenge homophobia and homophobic bullying, we must therefore also tackle the underlying stereotypes.

## **'Doing gender': cultural stereotypes of masculinity and femininity**

Being 'popular' and 'fitting in' by taking up the dominant positions of masculinity and femininity are expressed by pupils as extremely important. Homophobia and sexism are key elements in this process of 'doing gender', which is generally defined as conforming to and behaving in line



with prevailing constructions of masculine and feminine identities. Various studies have, for example, commented on the powerful role of homophobia within male peer culture and in constructing and reinforcing stereotypical ideas of what it means to be a 'real' boy or man. Based on the assumption of heterosexuality, boys who define themselves as masculine subjects in conformity with this dominant masculinity tend to position themselves in opposition to girls/women, gay or bisexual and/or non-macho boys/men.

For girls, a socially acceptable femininity is also premised on the norm of heterosexuality, and includes a requirement to have a 'feminine' appearance, thus marking girls out as different to the boys. Deviations from these 'feminine' conventions, including being too sexual, too popular, too different or too confident, are thereby stigmatised as being evidence of a girl's 'distorted' sexuality and expressed, for example, in pejorative comments about the girl being 'butch', a 'slag', a 'bitch', or a 'lezzie'.

Boys' and girls' sex/gender identities are developed under constant pressure and surveillance between and within male and female peer groups. In the classroom, boys frequently silence girls through sexist abuse and sexual harassment. At the same time, homophobia serves as a means for boys to distance themselves from femininity and forcefully reject boys who do not conform to the dominant standard of masculinity. The emphasis on heterosexuality thereby ensures that the story of 'romance', which promotes male dominance and female subordination, is not challenged or dislocated by girls who, within the context of their own heterosexuality, might display more 'laddish' behaviours.

Although there are alternative forms of masculinity and femininity in our culture that, in some manifestations, challenge the cultural stereotypes, they are usually posited as 'deviant' and therefore remain subordinate to the dominant cultural expectations of masculinity and femininity. ATL recognises that teachers and lecturers have an important role in addressing and challenging such prejudices and stereotypes, including through the school/college's ethos and mission statement, the curriculum, pastoral support systems, working with parents, governors and the community, and through specific initiatives such as, the celebration of LGBT History Month or International Women's Day.

### **Every child matters and youth matters**

Narrow and stereotypical views of male and female identity restrict all boys and girls. They restrict not only the victims of homophobic and/or sexist bullying and abuse, who are disproportionately more likely to truant, drop out of school without any qualifications and are at an increased risk to self-harm and/or commit suicide, but they also restrict those individuals who fear social isolation and bullying and thus feel under pressure to prove their 'masculinity' or 'femininity' by engaging in abusive or risk-taking behaviour.

The Education and Inspections Act 2006 requires schools and colleges to implement measures that encourage respect for others, promote self-discipline amongst pupils, and prevent all forms of bullying, including homophobic and sexist bullying. Schools and colleges also have a responsibility under the Government's *Every Child Matters* agenda to ensure that 'every child and young person is able to fulfil their potential'. This means that schools and colleges must systematically and consistently deal with specific homophobic and sexist incidents and should simultaneously begin to tackle the underlying culture leading to homophobic and sexist behaviour.

***ATL believes that the need for a wider process of cultural change requires a more in-depth understanding of the interrelatedness of homophobia and sexism.***

### **Why do we need a focus on homophobia and sexism?**

There are at least three reasons to suggest a focus on homophobia and sexism as interrelated manifestations of a culture that privileges particular stereotypes of masculinity and femininity.

#### ***Sexist bullying is not just perpetrated by boys or men***

Sexist bullying is predominantly perpetrated by males upon females. Girls and young women are almost twice as likely to be on the child protection register for sexual abuse as boys and young men. Statistics also show that in the UK, two women per week are killed by a male partner or former partner, and that one in four women will be a victim of domestic violence in their lifetime.

However, the Anti-Bullying Alliance notes that sexist bullying has 'an impact on both genders, and can be perpetrated by both genders on opposite and same-gender victims'. The concept of sexism alone is not inclusive enough to facilitate such an awareness. In particular, the sexist bullying of girls by other girls as part of establishing conformity to dominant expectations of femininity and to the related boundaries of appropriate sexuality and sexual behaviour is not readily associated with the term sexism.

#### ***Homophobic bullying is not restricted to lesbian, gay and bisexual people***

Homophobic bullying and abuse is not exclusively targeted at lesbian, gay and bisexual people, but also at those who are perceived to be lesbian, gay or bisexual, or who do not conform to existing sex/gender codes. The term 'homophobia', which is generally defined as the passive or active resentment or fear of someone who is lesbian, gay or bisexual, does not explicitly include a reference to a lack of conformity to stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity. Although homophobia presupposes such stereotypes by identifying behaviour that 'deviates' from these cultural norms as 'gay', we might wish to resist the homophobic notion of the existence of 'gay behaviour'.

#### ***Homophobic abuse of gay men frequently involves language that is derogatory to females***

The vocabulary of homophobic abuse of gay males commonly consists of terms derogatory to females, such as 'sissy', 'girl', 'faggot', and 'nancy boy'. This interrelatedness of homophobia and sexism is also expressed in the regular and wholly pejorative use of the term 'effeminate' to identify a 'lack' of masculinity in boys or men and at the same time stigmatise the 'effete' or 'effeminate' male through the term's simultaneous association with homosexuality.

### **Tackling homophobia and sexism using the concept of heterosexism**

The concept of heterosexism includes a focus on both homophobia and sexism and therefore enables us to account for the underlying cultural prejudice against lesbian, gay and bisexual people. This prejudice is firmly tied to dominant male and female identities that rely on heterosexuality as a norm.

Heterosexism includes attitudes, behaviour and practices that constitute heterosexuality as the norm. At the same time, heterosexism reflects and encourages a dislike or feeling of superiority towards girls and women.

ATL believes that we can only successfully tackle sexism and homophobia by seeing them as two integral parts of the wider cultural problem of heterosexism. Heterosexism advocates and supports a narrowly defined set of heterosexual sex/gender identities that restrict everyone. Those who do not conform to these stereotypical notions of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' are frequently subjected to homophobic and sexist bullying and abuse.

ATL therefore recommends that heterosexism is widely adopted as the concept through which we challenge the narrow and restrictive stereotypes of masculinity and femininity as well as understanding the close links between homophobia and sexism. Tackling homophobic and sexist bullying and abuse using the concept of heterosexism means that our educational institutions will be better equipped to contribute to a change in social attitudes and the promotion of a more inclusive, equitable and just society in which everyone, regardless of their sex/gender identity and sexual orientation, feels equally valued, respected and safe.

This position statement is based on existing research and educational thinking around these issues in the UK and elsewhere.

### **Terminology**

**Gender** generally refers to the social and cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity and indicates that a man or woman's position is not dictated by nature, biology or sex, but is a matter of social and political convention.

**Sex** refers more specifically to male or female physiology as biological constructions of the body.

In this document, we have used the term **sex/gender** to indicate that even the depiction of male and female physiognomy has depended on the social and political significance accorded to gendered notions of masculinity and femininity. Physiological difference as the 'natural' basis for gender difference therefore cannot be separated from social and cultural constructions of manhood and womanhood.

**Sexist bullying** includes abusive name-calling; gestures and comments about appearance and emerging puberty; sexual innuendos and propositions; the public display of pornographic material and graffiti with sexual content; domestic or intimate abuse; and sexual assault or rape. Most commonly, sexist bullying is perpetrated by males upon females and is based on a dislike of or feeling of superiority towards girls and women. Women are thereby seen as legitimate targets for sexist and sexualised behaviour.

**Homophobic bullying** is often present in an environment that fails to challenge and respond to homophobia. It can be verbal, which involves name-calling, public ridicule, text messaging and the regular use of offensive and discriminatory language that refers to someone's sexual orientation. It also often manifests itself indirectly through the spreading of rumours and/or the social isolation of the individual. In its most severe form, homophobic bullying is characterised by physical attacks and sexual assault. Homophobic bullying does not just affect people who identify as LGBT. In schools, homophobic bullying can directly affect any young person whose life choices, interests or needs do not conform to accepted gender norms, as well as adult members of the school community who are LGBT, and anyone who may have friends or relatives who are LGB (DfES, *Stand Up for Us*, 2004).

If you would like further information or to comment on this briefing paper please do so by contacting ATL on [policybriefings@atl.org.uk](mailto:policybriefings@atl.org.uk)

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