

SAFE, RESPECTFUL AND INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS



CAN START WITH YOU

BY DEBRA PARKER, JUSTINE DEVONPORT & BIANCA WALSH

Imagine a learning environment where everyone is viewed and treated equally, where people can access and enjoy the same resources and opportunities

REGARDLESS OF GENDER, RACE, ABILITY OR SEXUAL ORIENTATION.

Imagine a learning environment where people feel equally valued, acknowledged and celebrated and the impact of that on their life, careers, and connection with communities.

Many educators may claim that this exists, that they are already creating this space, but despite these claims and without laying blame, we know that educators are a product of the environment in which they live and work. This environment exists in a world where individuals are not equally

VALUED, ACKNOWLEDGED AND CELEBRATED

“VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IS ONE OF THE MOST CRITICAL HEALTH ISSUES IN AUSTRALIA AND AROUND THE WORLD.”

Today’s learner – and educator – does not have equal access to resources and opportunities. Persistent norms, practices and structures around gender roles and behaviour influence the way educators are treated and behave, and the way the learning environments are structured, influencing outcomes for women, men and non-binary individuals.

STILL A LONG WAY TO GO

Why does this happen? Because, despite years of work to increase gender equality and promote respectful behaviour, the education sector is still not a safe place for many. The recent release of the *National Student Safety Survey Report 2022* by the Social Research Centre shows an environment that is reflective of the society in which it exists, with 1 in 6 learners experiencing sexual harassment and 1 in 20 experiencing sexual assault. Female, transgender and non-binary learners were more likely to have had this experience and 84% involved a male perpetrator.

Violence against women is one of the most critical health issues in Australia and around the world. Figures released by Our Watch in 2022 show the prevalence of this issue for Australian women.



Our Watch’s *Change the Story* framework also highlighted that the greatest predictor of this violence is gender inequality and attitudes that support dominant forms of masculinity and sexist attitudes and behaviour.

BREAKING THE CYCLE

It is recognised, following years of research and work in this area, that challenging long-held gender stereotypes and norms requires a long term, multi-faceted approach across whole populations. The education sector has a critical role to play in this process; in challenging gender stereotypes, sexism, and dominant forms of masculinity to ensure equality of opportunity, access and outcomes for women, men and non-binary individuals.

There are opportunities within the education sector for action to take place at three levels: within the workplace setting, the learning environment and the curriculum content.

BUILDING EQUITABLE WORKPLACES

Our Watch’s *Respect and Equality in TAFE* outlines a step-by-step process to support TAFEs in preventing violence against women and building educational environments where educators and learners feel safe, respected and valued.

Emphasising that gender equality is not just about making workplaces safe for women and girls and respecting their human rights – though this is central to any whole of organisation approach that seeks workplace gender equality – it is also about supporting and encouraging positive health outcomes for men and boys and debunking rigid stereotypes of masculinity which reinforce gender inequality and result in poorer health outcomes for men.

Another whole-of-organisation approach is the Our Watch *Workplace Equality & Respect Standards* (WERS). These tools offer a process for organisational change to prevent violence against women.

REVIEWING YOUR CURRICULUM AND ENVIRONMENT

As educators you can be a catalyst for change; you can play a part in reducing gender inequality and contributing to a more just and equitable society through applying a gender lens to your educational design and teaching practice. Parker and Swindon (2020)

Gender-responsive pedagogical practices support positive learning environments. Applying a gender lens requires you to consider the gendered impacts in your work and can include:

Gendered bias and relationships

Educators should be taught and encouraged to consider their own gender bias and how it impacts on their relationships with their learners. For example, whether they call on male learners to answer questions about science more frequently than female learners based on an unconscious belief that men know more about science than women.

Learner interaction

Analyse if men, women and gender-diverse people all contribute to the discussion equally. For example, consider how different facilitation styles may impact genders differently – you can increase participation by women and gender diverse people through your teaching practice.

Inclusion within the learning environment

Assess if the learning environment is inclusive and accessible for all genders. For example, providing space for people to introduce their pronouns may assist LGBTQI learners to feel welcome in the space.

Gendered representation within teaching and learning resources

Consider whether recommended external resources have a balance of female and male authors and perspectives.

Stereotypes within teaching and learning resources

Consider if learning examples use stereotypes that reinforce rigid ideas about roles and professions. For example, men in leadership roles and women in caring professions.

Role modelling

As educators, role-modelling the behaviours, attitudes and culture of respect that you want to see in others is an important first step in developing a respectful environment. For example, talking openly about a gender spectrum, displaying behaviours counter to stereotypes, utilising examples that display an intersectional experience are all small actions that will bring about change.

Taking bystander action

Using your voice and actions to interrupt disrespect sexist attitudes and behaviours that disrupt safe, respectful and inclusive learning environments

Bystander action is such an important part of how safe, respectful and inclusive learning environments can start with you that it is important to take a deeper dive into this subject.

BE AN AGENT FOR CHANGE

There are four common ways for taking bystander action that can be applied to the learning environment, actions that can be used to help educators stand up to the attitudes and behaviours that contribute to violence against women.

- 1. Direct action** means speaking up in the moment. Use 'I' statements instead of 'you' statements as this is often easier for people to hear since it is not directed to the person using the language; people are less likely to get upset or antagonistic with being called out. Sometimes taking direct action is not easy or appropriate in an educational setting. It may disrupt the session or cause humiliation to both the perpetrator and the victim. There are other options available to you in these circumstances – read on.
- 2. Action that distracts** can disrupt the dialogue and can be done by changing the subject, physically moving away and showing disapproval or interrupting the conversation.
- 3. Delaying your response** is sometimes the most prudent course of action. Bystander action doesn't have to always be in the moment, there are lots of reasons why an educator may not act immediately but may choose to check in with people or take action later.

- 4. Delegating action** allows the educator to take authoritative steps by making a report, referring to workplace policies and procedures, talking to a manager or even, where required, calling the police for action. You are delegating action through these authoritative steps.



Not all disrespectful behaviours lead to violence against women, but all violence against women starts with disrespect

Taking bystander action is about interrupting disrespect before it develops into violence. Disrupting behaviours which lead to gender-based violence, as seen in the lower sections of the pyramid above, can topple the pyramid, breaking the cycle of violence.

To create a world where all people have equal respectful access to resources and opportunities regardless of gender, race, ability or sexual orientation with no threat of violence will require a cultural shift, a shift away from sexism, objectification, exclusion and rigid stereotypes.

Everyone has a role to play, and as educators, it can start with you.



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FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

3 Transitions Even the Best Leaders Gender responsive teaching practice within tertiary education (2021, Women's Health Victoria)
<https://whv.org.au/resources/whv-publications/gender-responsive-teaching-practice-within-tertiary-education>

Interrupting Sexism at Work: What Drives Men to Respond Directly or Do Nothing? (Negin Sattari et al., 2020, Catalyst)
<https://www.catalyst.org/reports/interrupting-sexism-workplace-men/>

Masculinities and Health (2020, VicHealth)
<https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/media-and-resources/publications/healthiermasculinities>

Respect and Equality in Tertiary Education (Our Watch)
<https://tertiaryeducation.ourwatch.org.au/>

The Need for Gender Equity in Teaching Practice (Debra Parker & Ellie Swindon, 2020, Training & Development)
[https://womenshealthvic.com.au/resources/WHV_Publications/Article_2020.09.01_The-need-for-gender-equity-in-teaching-practice_Training-and-Development_Sep-2020_\(Fulltext-PDF\).pdf](https://womenshealthvic.com.au/resources/WHV_Publications/Article_2020.09.01_The-need-for-gender-equity-in-teaching-practice_Training-and-Development_Sep-2020_(Fulltext-PDF).pdf)

Workplace Equality and Respect (Our Watch)
<https://workplace.ourwatch.org.au/>