

## **Co-education is no help for girls as UK study finds sexual harassment is rife in co-ed schools**

It has recently been reported that another boys' school is considering converting to a co-educational school. This is in response to the avalanche of sexual assault and rape allegations levelled against boys by thousands of Australian girls via the petition launched by Chanel Contos.

At the same time, the NSW Department of Education has announced plans to guarantee access to co-educational schools for students living in Sydney's single-sex public high school catchment zones.

In both cases, these decisions appear to give more weight to what is considered best for boys, rather than taking any harm done to girls into account. Indeed, it would seem a cruel irony to push for more co-educational schools and even further limit access to single-sex schools when, based on both research and anecdotal evidence regarding sexual harassment and sexual assault of girls, it would make more sense to be guaranteeing, or even increasing, access for girls to single-sex schools.

A recently republished Australian study has found that girls experience significantly higher rates of sex-based harassment in co-ed schools. As sexual bullying is known to be especially damaging to girls, the Flinders University study adds to the already strong case for educating girls in female-only environments.

Adjunct Professor Roslyn Shute's research establishes that boy-to-girl harassment is the most frequent type of sex-based harassment in co-educational schools. Boys are far more likely than girls to be the perpetrators of sexually-toned bullying, victimising mainly girls and, to a lesser extent, gender nonconforming boys. Shute suggests that single-sex schooling could be one way to address the sex-based harassment of girls.

Shute's findings are supported by evidence from a UK study which found that sexist language is often dismissed by teachers as "harmless banter" in co-ed schools, although many girls view it as harmful and distressing bullying. Even more concerning, a British parliamentary enquiry found that girls in co-ed high schools are subjected to daily sexual harassment, including unwanted sexual touching and sexting.

Studies that have looked closely at bullying in schools have made comparable findings. An analysis of Australian and New Zealand data from the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) clearly demonstrates that the incidence of bullying of girls in single-sex schools is markedly lower than for girls in co-educational schools. Overseas, an American study found that less than one per cent of girls in single-sex schools experience bullying, compared with 21 per cent in co-ed schools.

In light of these findings, and the allegations of sexism, sexual assault and harassment emerging from school-aged girls across Australia, the suggestion that boys' schools simply need to admit girls to be transformed into beacons for respectful relationships and gender equality is reckless. Co-education is not a quick-fix for decades of male entitlement, privilege and elitism. Adding girls will not, by itself, change long-held attitudes about gender roles and male dominance, nor a culture where boys consider it normal and acceptable to make sexualised comments about girls, demand nude pictures via social media, and shame girls who they deem to be 'sluts' or 'frigid'.

It is not difficult to see that a school culture in which girls are viewed primarily as sexual objects and conquests, and where teachers often dismiss the sexual harassment of girls as 'boys just being boys', leads to a total lack of respect for girls.

Australian and international research tells us that a co-educational environment brings more sexual harassment into the classroom, not less, and will not create a safe and equal learning environment for girls. In fact, co-ed schools mirror what we see in broader society — an environment where women's voices are marginalised and the balance of power is skewed in favour of men. If we are serious about what's best for girls, as well as boys, then co-education is not the answer.

Of course there are educators and students who are working hard to change the culture of entitlement and sexism perpetuated in schools — who believe that we need women, as well as men, represented in leadership roles, in every profession and in every workplace. But without a holistic societal approach to gender equality that addresses the rape and sexual assault of school-age girls, change seems unlikely any time soon.

This presents an especially pertinent conundrum for the many boys' schools hoping to 'just add girls' to solve their problems, as well as for the parents of girls (and boys) who think that sending their child to a co-educational school will somehow shield them against bullying, sexism, gender stereotyping and, worse still, sexual harassment and assault. Where is the wellbeing of girls prioritised in this equation?

We are long overdue for a national conversation about the attitudes of men towards women, respectful relationships, domestic violence, sexual assault, and the safety of women and girls. Until we ensure that women and girls are respected in their homes, schools, universities, workplaces and society we will not achieve an equal future.

Conversations around sexual consent need to be normalised and discussed comfortably by parents and educators with students — both girls and boys — if we are really going to accelerate change.

Girls' schools are already doing this and girls' school graduates like Chanel Contos, are speaking out. They are leading the conversation and taking proactive steps to right the imbalance of power.

Journalist and author Madonna King recently wrote:

*'The amount of work, around consent and respect, in girls' schools is phenomenal. Teachers have stood in front of the class to explain that time when they were assaulted. Girls have been encouraged to speak out, and believe they will be heard. And to call out the behaviour that is providing headlines around the world.'*

Parents of boys should be asking their sons' schools — both boys' and co-educational schools — what concrete actions they are taking to eliminate sex-based harassment and to educate boys that sexual activities without consent are not a right, but in fact a serious criminal offence? Perhaps, given Shute's research, this question is even more important in co-educational schools?

The silence and lack of any real action from our political leaders and the principals of some of our co-educational and boys' schools in response to Chanel Contos' petition on sexual assault says everything we need to know about the way girls and women are perceived and treated in this country. And why, sadly, we are still many decades away from a truly gender equal society.

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