

# GENDER EQUALITY COMMISSION

## Tackling gender stereotypes and sexism

### CONFERENCE REPORT

Helsinki, Finland  
28–29 March 2019



**PRESIDENCY OF FINLAND**

Council of Europe  
November 2018 - May 2019

**PRÉSIDENTIE DE LA FINLANDE**

Conseil de l'Europe  
Novembre 2018 - Mai 2019

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



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Cover and layout: Documents and  
Publications Production Department  
(SPDP), Council of Europe

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This publication has not been  
copy-edited by the SPDP Editorial  
Unit to correct typographical  
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Printed at the Council of Europe

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# Introduction

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*“Today sexism is endemic, tomorrow is up to us”*

Kat Banyard, Founder of UK Feminista  
Conference Keynote address

Sexism is rife in all areas of life across Europe. Deep-seated patterns of stereotypes and discrimination limit the potential of women and men, as people make big and small decisions based on biased assumptions rather than on fact. As a result, gender (among other markers of difference) determines to a large degree a person's choice when it comes to education and career, participation in sports and other interests, access to resources and leadership positions, as well as the degree of care responsibilities and the number of hours of unpaid work. As such, stereotypes limit women's and men's roles, constricting the development of individuals' natural talents and strengths, their educational and professional opportunities and experiences. Sexism and stereotypes inhibit many people – especially women, LGBT people, members of minorities – from making their voices heard and from making career choices, despite being entitled to such activities and despite the fact that society as a whole would benefit from this.

Sexism is one of the reasons why progress in gender equality laws, policies and practices still does not result in fully-fledged and effective equality at the structural, cultural and personal levels. The existence of sexism shows that there is an urgent need to confront the underlying causes of discrimination and disparity, often hidden in plain sight. The Conference on *Tackling gender stereotypes and sexism* brought together policy-makers and practitioners from across various sectors, countries and international institutions, and provided an opportunity to share experiences in tackling sexism and gender bias. This report outlines key discussions of the conference, particularly examples of best practices from the public sector and business and civil society organisations which were showcased at the conference.

The conference coincided with the adoption, on 27 March 2019, of [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2019\)1 to member States on preventing and combating sexism](#) by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. The present report concludes with a series of recommendations on how this instrument can be put into practice and provides specific examples that can serve as inspiration for developing similar initiatives in other countries.

## Defining sexism

Recommendation CM/Rec(2019)1 defines sexism as “any act, gesture, visual representation, spoken or written words, practice or behaviour based upon the idea that a person or a group of persons is inferior because of their sex, which occurs in the public or private sphere, whether online or offline, with the purposes or effect of:

- I. violating the inherent dignity or rights of a person or a group of persons; or
- II. resulting in physical, sexual, psychological or socio-economic harm or suffering to a person or group of persons; or
- III. creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment; or
- IV. constituting a barrier to the autonomy and full realisation of human rights by a person or a group of persons; or
- V. maintaining and reinforcing gender stereotypes”.

We all observe the world around us continuously and make assumptions about those things for which we have incomplete information. Assumptions help us make decisions about things that affect us, ranging from what we might have for lunch, which route to take on our way to work or which career to pursue. Assumptions become problematic, however, when we make them about other people based on deep-seated stereotypes concerning a person’s gender, age, race, sexual orientation, or ability. This is unconscious bias that is ingrained in our thought patterns as well as in our institutions, social structures and cultures. We are surrounded and influenced by stereotypes from an early age, in all areas of life. Stereotypes find many types of expression, be it the differential treatment of girls and boys from infancy, differences in career choices recommended to female and male students, different opportunities in sports participation, or the unequal representation of women and men in the media and in entertainment products. Such unequal outcomes resulting from gender stereotypes are compounded by stereotypes and prejudices based on race or ethnicity, age, dis/ability, refugee or migrant status, and sexual orientation and gender identity. Stereotypes are both a cause and a consequence of sexism and gender inequality.

Gender stereotypes typically function as opposites, e.g. strong/weak, at the heart of which is a “division/imbalance of power”, or an “unequal power relation”. Powerful and positive traits are typically seen as masculine, whereas negative and passive traits are associated with femininity. As a result, people are judged differently for the same behaviour depending on their gender. Women in leadership roles, and particularly women of colour, are often faced with the “likeability” challenge, making them worry that people will not like them anymore

if they push the boundaries. Furthermore, not only are (white, straight) men deemed more suitable for powerful positions, but a (white, straight) male is also deemed as “neutral”. Policies, businesses and even artificial intelligence systems are built on the assumption that the default citizen, worker or user is (white, straight) male. Finally, there are penalties for both women and men for transgressing stereotypes, and as such, men can also suffer from the strict confines of gender roles.

The imbalance of power in society means, however, that women and gender minorities suffer from systemic discrimination and sexism. This shows that stereotypes and discrimination are not just based on individual biased assumptions, but they are built on unequal structures of power and the ideologies that uphold such structures.

Sexism results in deeply unequal outcomes in all areas of life. Gender-based violence is still widespread in our societies across Europe, with extraordinarily low reporting and conviction rates. In the world of work, sexist stereotypes and discrimination result in the glass ceiling, the persistent gender pay gap across industries and sectors, and sexual harassment in the workplace. Sexism is also rife in schools. According to a survey of secondary schools in the United Kingdom, for example, one quarter of all secondary teachers witness everyday stereotyping in those institutions ([UK Feminista: “It’s just everywhere” A study on sexism in schools and how to tackle it](#)). Sexism and gender stereotypes also have pervasive impacts on people’s image of themselves, their self-esteem and their mental health.

Sexism is also reflected in women’s low representation in decision-making positions and in politics, and in obstacles they face in their attempts to work effectively as senior managers or as elected representatives. Recently, members (MPs) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and their staff were surveyed on sexism, abuse and violence in European parliaments.<sup>1</sup> The findings point to the existence of sexist attitudes and abuse in such core democratic institutions: 85% of MPs had experienced psychological violence against them, 58% had been abused online, 67% had had comments made about their physical appearance.

Women who do reach positions of power and decision-making often come from similar ethnic and regional backgrounds (social classes) to the men holding those positions. If we do not take the plurality of women, in Europe and elsewhere, seriously, we risk supplanting one type of discrimination with another. Sexism affects all people, but it affects everyone differently as it intersects with

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1. “Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Europe”, Joint study of the Inter-Parliamentary Union and Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe



other forms of identity and discrimination. While men in power benefit from sexism – at least at first sight – women who have access to other privileged identities are more able to shield themselves from the economic, social and emotional burden of sexism than those without such possibilities. Finally, sexism is particularly harmful to people who do not conform to strict binary definitions of gender. This is reflected by the violence and other hate crimes suffered by anyone challenging gender norms and stereotypes, whether it is because of their sexual orientation or their gender identity.

### Key challenges in tackling sexism

Sexism is a challenging problem to tackle because it relies on stereotypes that seem so natural and on inequalities that are hidden in plain sight. Gender identity and gender relations are experienced at a deeply personal level. This makes policy-making in the field of gender equality different from many other policy areas: it is a lived reality for all of us. We can probably all name an instance when we have experienced gender discrimination and/or sexism, or at least when we were at the receiving end of ill-conceived stereotypes.

Preventing and combating sexism thus begins at the personal level. We all need to become more aware of our own thinking patterns and identify potential bias, and we need to address the blind spots that still exist in our gender equality work. For example, to fully tackle sexism, we need to consider how we could move from a strictly binary conception of gender towards privileging a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding. Or how we could make space for those voices that are currently underrepresented in gender equality-related policy-making in our countries and organisations.

*It is important to remember that gender stereotypes are created by people and therefore they can also be reconstructed by people.*

Annika Saarikko,  
Minister of Family Affairs and Social Services, Finland

Tackling gender stereotypes can have highly political implications as it involves countering entrenched power relations, such as challenging large industries and powerful companies that make huge profits from sexist imagery or the sexual exploitation of women, whether in the global pornography industry or major social media companies. Pornography is accessed online at unprecedented levels, and the industry is developing tools to reach out to children

as young as nine (via the Internet or mobile phones). It perpetuates harmful, sexist attitudes about women and men, fuels violence against women and profits from the exploitation of the women who work in the industry in high numbers in Central and Eastern Europe, for example. Mainstream social media companies, such as Facebook and YouTube, also profit from disseminating sexist materials and have been slow to react to offensive materials such as images of violence against women or online bullying. The important role played by powerful companies in perpetuating sexism, but also in challenging the existing policy frameworks and regulations, means that stereotypes and discrimination cannot be tackled solely by awareness-raising measures aimed at changing attitudes alone. A bolder approach is needed in such cases, for instance legal frameworks that require the introduction of robust internal policies, the establishment of complaints mechanisms, mechanisms providing for remedial action available for victims and so on.

Power relations in the private sphere tend to be equally entrenched. Sexism cannot be countered unless we tackle the division of labour (and of power) in the household, including as regards reproductive and care work. Historically, discrimination in the labour force, in public policy and in decision-making has been more readily addressed than deeply held assumptions about who should bear caring responsibilities within families. As a result, women remain disadvantaged in the labour market; stereotypes about women as not fit to be leaders persist, and women – mothers, in particular – carry the double burden of paid and unpaid work. What happens in the private sphere and how caring responsibility is divided has implications for the prospects of parliamentarians, journalists and filmmakers, to name just a few. Indeed, one of the most pervasive repercussions of the unequal division of care work is the perpetuation of stereotypical gender norms from one generation to the next.

Today, gender equality advocates in Europe are confronted with a tougher challenge than that of developing appropriate policies and implementation mechanisms. Conference participants raised concerns about an ongoing, systemic undermining of achieved gains in gender equality, and in human rights and human dignity. This aspect of the political environment in which we work means that there will be considerable pushback on many of the initiatives that have been identified during this conference. More than ever, it has become important to support and nurture Europe-wide networks that pool expertise and build alliances for tackling sexism. It is furthermore important to ensure that these networks are as inclusive and intersectional as possible.

# Tackling sexism: learning from good practices

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The Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers has taken an important step by adopting the *Recommendation on Preventing and Combating Sexism*. The conference brought together experts from different sectors from across Europe to share their experiences with policies and practices to tackle stereotypes, discrimination and sexism and to inform ways in which member States can begin to put the Recommendation into practice. The good practices can be grouped into three broad categories:

- (i) raising awareness and changing attitudes,
- (ii) creating an enabling environment, and
- (iii) regulating and legislating.

This section gives an overview of several good practices within each category that can serve as inspiration for similar initiatives elsewhere.

## Raising awareness and changing attitudes

Initiatives to raise awareness and to change attitudes about gender roles and relations are an integral part of the toolkit to fight sexism. Such initiatives have a place in schools, workplaces, political institutions and in the media. For example, UK Feminista – a campaigning organisation – is training both would-be teachers and serving teachers on sexist attitudes and sexual harassment in schools. The organisation has developed template strategies for the classroom that can be downloaded by teachers. Entities like the pharmaceutical company Pfizer organise in the European region sessions for employees to exchange and discuss the potential impact of unconscious bias on strategic decisions and on employees' sense of belonging within the company. To this end, Pfizer organises awareness-raising workshops for managers to show what it means to be biased and follows up on these sessions by means of internal tools which allow to evaluate commitment and inclusion.

Another important form of training that can change attitudes is the motivational and skills training and mentoring offered to women who want to progress in their professional lives. In their attempt to improve gender balance among

managers in local government institutions, the German cities of Frankfurt and Wuppertal have organised motivational workshops for women interested in entering the management level, in addition to unconscious bias training for selection committees. Pfizer has developed for the European region a mentoring programme for female managers with high potential and has facilitated other female staff's membership in a business association of women operating in this sector, thereby providing them with access to tools and networks. The Belgian Association of Professional Journalists (AJP, Federation of Wallonia-Brussels) has provided media coaching for female experts in a drive to improve the gender balance of experts interviewed by journalists. The AJP has also published recommendations for journalists on the handling of violence against women in the media ([www.ajp.be/diversite](http://www.ajp.be/diversite)).

There have been important examples of campaigns that aim to change attitudes in society at large. The most well-known is the #MeToo campaign, whose ripple effects can be seen all over the world in the global mobilisation of women tackling sexism and harassment, but also in the backlash that many women have faced when they have made abuse visible. Other examples of more specific campaigns are the "Not in My Parliament" campaign, as well as the Russian "Sexist of the year" anti-award for sexist content in the media, advertising, and policy. Exposing examples of sexism in this way raises public awareness about the issue.

## Creating an enabling environment for gender equality

While changing attitudes and mindsets among people of all ages is important for tackling sexism, it is also important to take more concrete steps towards transforming structures and institutions into an environment that is more conducive to gender equality. Ending sexism should not be seen as the sole responsibility of individual women or men. The most important factors that determine whether an environment offers fertile ground for sexism and abuse or for the development of equitable gender relations are: violence/security, representation and workplaces with coherent approaches which promote gender equality.

The first, **ending harassment and the threat of violence**, is central for making schools, workplaces and communities better for women and men. It is particularly important to be able to provide an educational experience free from discrimination and violence to all girls and boys, irrespective of their ethnic background, religion, ability, sexual orientation or gender identity. The threat of violence and abuse is continuously keeping women, as well as sexual and gender minorities, from pursuing their goals, participating in

public discussion, decision-making and online communities on an equal footing with (straight) men. On the other hand, gender stereotypes make young men in particular, often from marginalised groups, also vulnerable to crime and interpersonal violence.

The second factor, **representation**, matters for gender relations and for sexism. When we see women in different sectors of society working successfully at all levels, more women are likely to follow suit and will face fewer obstacles. It is particularly important to be able to see women from diverse backgrounds in senior positions in business, culture, politics and administration. Representation of men in sectors and industries often dominated by women, including unpaid care work in the family, is equally important. Quotas can be helpful, even necessary, in situations where women's lack of representation feeds negative stereotypes which, in turn, keep representation low. However, there are other ways in which diverse representation can be improved. It is particularly important to challenge assumptions about expertise and leadership as inherently male attributes. In order to improve the representation in the media of women as experts and to improve diverse representation generally, the Belgian Association of Professional Journalists (AJP, Federation of Wallonia-Brussels), for example, developed "Expertalia", a resource for journalists that provides details of female experts in diverse fields as well as male experts from minority backgrounds. Likewise, having more women working as film directors and scriptwriters is likely to result in films and television programmes that better represent our diverse societies.

*The glass ceiling that prevents women from taking their place among the decision-makers in public life and private enterprise alike must be broken, once and for all.*

Gabriella Battaini-Dragoni,  
Deputy Secretary General, Council of Europe

A third factor is **workplaces' coherent promotion of gender equality**. Workplaces must deal effectively with sexism in all its forms. The most important determinant is the extent to which company leadership is driving change forward. Buy-in and motivation at the top are necessary conditions to changing attitudes, practices and expectations within organisations. Once the necessary political will exists, there are several tools that companies can use to tackle sexism. For example, the EDGE Certification, which defines itself as a "global

assessment and business certification for gender equality<sup>2</sup>; measures an organisation's gender balance at all levels: the gender pay gap, the practices and policies that are in place to ensure equitable careers and employees' ratings of career development opportunities. This provides managers with the opportunity to analyse their companies from a gender equality perspective as well as to benchmark against other companies, industries or sectors with the EDGE Certification Global Standard. Many companies have also recognised the branding value of a globally acknowledged certification process.

Tackling stereotypes and sexism in the workplace also requires employers to take employees' care responsibilities into account. German municipalities have developed an improved work-life balance programme, such as employer-provided childcare and opportunities for both men and women to work from home, a key prong in their strategy to improve career opportunities for women. Lack of consideration for care responsibilities not only holds women back in their careers, but it can significantly lower women's participation in public decision-making and representative institutions. A good work-life balance is ultimately beneficial for all employees, and not just parents.

## Regulation and legislation

A report drawing from the [Concluding Observations of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women \(CEDAW\)](#), published by Equality Now, listed many areas of discrimination. Some types of discrimination are obvious, such as laws providing for unequal inheritance, wife obedience or child marriage. There are often much less obviously sexist laws which are still discriminatory, however. For example, discriminatory nationality laws perpetuate the stereotype that women belong to their father or husband; parental leave legislation that excludes men reinforces the unequal division of care work; and the uneven implementation of equal pay laws imply that women, and the work they deliver, are simply worth a bit less.

An Equality Now report entitled: "[Roadblocks to justice: How the Law is failing survivors of sexual violence in Eurasia](#)", found patterns of discriminatory laws across the region: women are expected to settle rape cases; laws are framed in terms of honour and morality. Focus is often on preserving family honour.

In the United Kingdom too, men under 25 are likely to be acquitted of rape, often on the grounds that a conviction would ruin their future, that they would not be able to be breadwinners, and so on. There is a clear tendency in the course of trials, based on the logic of the defence, to look into the complaining

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2. See <http://edge-cert.org/>

victim's social history and to refer to any evidence of the woman being flirtatious or sexually assertive. If such elements are found, there is a tendency for the prosecution not to take the case forward as they believe that through stereotypes, women with such a social history are less likely to get justice.

Traditionally, rape laws tend to require the demonstration of use of additional force, including injuries. Several countries are now adjusting their legislation to reflect the requirements of the 2011 [Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence](#) (the Istanbul Convention). New legislation in Sweden now criminalises intercourse or any other sexual act with a person “who is not participating voluntarily” and passivity cannot *per se* be considered a sign of voluntary participation. This amendment is a departure from the previous offence of rape and sexual abuse which required the use of force, threats or the taking advantage of the vulnerable situation of the victim. In addition, two new offences of “negligent rape” and “negligent sexual abuse” have been introduced, to ensure criminal liability in cases where sexual acts or intercourse occur without any reasonable measures taken to establish the victim's consent.

Efforts are badly needed, particularly to develop effective laws and regulations to tackle new phenomena such as cyber-stalking or cyber-bullying. The omnipresence of connected smart devices in our lives means that sexist crimes take place online at an increasing pace and existing laws and practices are often insufficient to tackle them. Intimate partners or former partners can put individuals under surveillance; cyber-stalking can easily escalate and result in physical violence against the victim, including homicide. Cyber-bullying, on the other hand, can be carried out by complete strangers against the “archives” of social media data, such as photos. Extreme instances of cyber-bullying – which can also take the form of revenge porn – have resulted in severe mental illness, including suicide.

# Conclusions

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The expert presentations and discussions at the conference resulted in a number of lessons and good practices for European policy-makers and others willing to tackle gender stereotypes and sexism in institutions and communities around them.

1. The importance of **political will and leadership** for change has been stressed throughout. The [Recommendation on preventing and combating sexism](#) calls for comprehensive measures and initiatives to be taken across a wide range of sectors of society, including a clear ban on sexism through legislation and internal rules, as well as preventive measures and criminal sanctions against sexist hate speech especially. The attitudes of those in leadership positions, whether in companies, political institutions, education and civil society and research organisations are reflected in the policies implemented and the work carried out, in each organisation. Attitudes among the leadership and their initiatives affect the availability of specific resources for anti-sexism work, the credibility of responses to including effective sanctions for acts of sexist discrimination or harassment, and how seriously awareness-raising, training and certification initiatives are taken by staff at all levels. Strong and committed leadership as well as matching resource allocation enable more effective initiatives for organisational reform and for a better work-life balance, improving the image of women in society and the media, and their participation in decision-making positions.

2. Systemic change in workplaces and in society **takes time and expertise**. The **availability of funding in a sustained manner** makes a central difference to ensure that innovative approaches to tackle sexism result in sustainable changes. Sufficient resources allow, for example, for employment of gender equality focal points (such as in German municipalities), development of research to build – and to keep updated – concrete empirical data which can be used for the development of evidence-based policies on stereotypes and sexism, as well as matching salaries in industries dominated by women with their counterparts in sectors dominated by men or regarded as neutral.

3. Gender equality units and programmes should prioritise their **analysis of stereotypes and unconscious bias**, as well as the political nature of sexism, which undermines many otherwise well thought-through initiatives. Many programmes and initiatives may be based on assumptions that do not take the pervasive nature of stereotypes and discrimination fully into account, for example assuming that women's under-representation in certain employment



sectors is merely a result of a lack of access to information, or can be attributed to preference among women for other types of employment.

4. Stereotypes and sexism intersect with other identities and factors of power, including age, ethnicity and race, ability, sexual orientation and gender identity. All work to tackle sexism should **take intersectionality seriously** and analyse openly the different hidden discriminations and inequalities that signify the variety of experiences of sexism.

5. International instruments, such as the Council of Europe's [Recommendation on preventing and combating sexism](#) and the [Istanbul Convention](#), can be very useful for national actors working in the field of gender equality to **hold governments to account**. Such synergies can be supported through systematic collaboration between different actors on specific aspects of sexism, for example, in recruitment, media and online.

6. Member states will be expected to **monitor progress** in the implementation of the [Recommendation on preventing and combating sexism](#) and to report back regularly on measures taken and progress achieved. These monitoring and reporting processes could be harnessed to enable learning, collaboration and accountability both at national and at European levels.

The Council of Europe Recommendation to prevent and combat sexism features the first international legal definition of sexism. It shows the various areas where sexism manifests, why it is harmful and what can and should be done to prevent and combat it.

[www.coe.int](http://www.coe.int)

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