Step up!
Be an anti-sexism
STEM ally

An anti-sexism[i] ally is a person who takes a stand against gender oppression. Allies play a valuable role in helping work towards equality.

Why is sexism in STEM an issue?

Research shows that sexism remains a serious issue in STEM departments.

Women students and staff are acutely under-represented in disciplines such as engineering, physics, computing and mathematics. Even in subjects where equivalent numbers of men and women participate, many women are still excluded or disadvantaged by the masculine culture and everyday sexism.

The UCL ASPIRES[ii] study surveyed students in England and found that women undergraduate STEM students are significantly more likely than those in non-STEM areas to experience sexism – most frequently from male peers.

Experiences of sexism continue in the workforce[iii] and are associated with women leaving STEM.

There are many benefits to challenging sexism and promoting inclusion in STEM, including improving recruitment and retention of talent; more collaborative, creative and effective learning environments; and safer, happier staff and students.

Women[iv] STEM degree students are twice as likely as non-STEM students to have experienced sexism or gender discrimination in their educational setting during the past year.
The ASPIRES project, UCL, 2023

"In labs, when I'm partnered up with a male lab partner, I feel like they sometimes don't take you that seriously." (Mienie, Chemistry degree student)

Spot the common signs of sexism

The ASPIRES study found that women STEM students most commonly reported experiencing everyday sexism from peers. This included:

- ☒ **Sexist microaggressions**, e.g. questioning women's academic ability; ignoring, patronising, undermining or sidelining women and their contributions;
- ☒ **Discounting or negating women's complaints and experiences of sexism**, e.g. "it's her own fault", "its not that serious", "she just has a chip on her shoulder", "it's not sexism", etc.;
- ☒ **Stereotyping and propagating gender myths**, e.g. assuming that men and women have different 'brains' when it comes to STEM, or that men are 'naturally' better at STEM;
- ☒ **Sexist banter or abuse**; sharing sexist views or materials (verbally or digitally); sexual harassment;
- ☒ **Actively or complicitly assigning women administrative or menial roles** in experiments, practicals or project work;
- ☒ **Not questioning or addressing the ongoing underrepresentation of women** in STEM at all levels.

"Sometimes I'll say something and they [male students] don't listen properly. It's really frustrating. It's not a super-diverse course, it's mainly white men. And if I say something, they just assume that it's wrong." (Hannah, Physics degree student)

Take the five steps!

Reflecting on the following five steps can help STEM staff and students become anti-sexism allies and create more inclusive experiences for everyone. Each step includes prompts to help you develop gender awareness and take positive action.

Assumptions

Promote gender-inclusive attitudes and beliefs by:

- Recognising that all genders have equal STEM aptitude, and reflecting this in your conversations and behaviours;
- Challenging myths such as the idea of a 'maths brain' or 'science brain', as there is no evidence that men and women have different aptitudes for STEM based on biological differences;
- Calling out the difference between humour and sexist banter.

Behaviours

Embody inclusion of, and respect for, women staff and students by:

- Actively listening to and valuing women peers, both in class and as friends/colleagues;
- Challenging behaviours like 'mansplaining' or when, without invitation, a male student tells a student of different gender what to think or how 'best' to perform a task;
- Ensuring that you do not dominate class discussions but make space for, and value, all contributions; helping everyone's ideas and contributions to be explicitly recognised and attributed fairly;
- Actively supporting women to take leadership roles, such as in group-based lab work.

Contacts

Support gender-inclusive social relations by:

- Building gender-diverse friendships and social networks; taking steps to ensure that others are not excluded.

Disclosure

Ensure that sexism can be disclosed and addressed effectively by:

- Reporting sexist behaviour and ensuring it is officially recorded, as reporting is an important step in enabling change; encouraging an open and safe reporting culture;
- Checking that your department has a safe way for people to share their concerns;
- Ensuring that if a fellow student shares an experience of sexism, you listen carefully, show respect, take it seriously and offer help, if it is wanted;
- Sensitively and appropriately asking those who experience sexism what can be done to help create a welcoming, supportive and inclusive department/research group.

Encourage everyone

Help everyone to step up and create more equitable environments in STEM by:

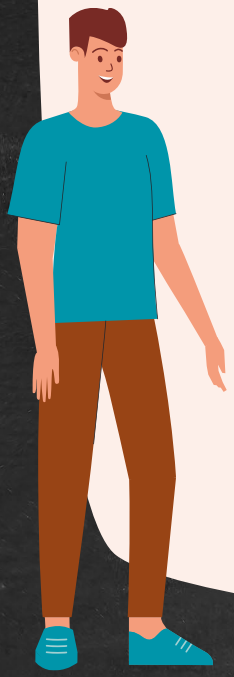
- Encouraging others to also develop their awareness and take positive action;
- Asking your department to provide gender bias training for all;
- Advocating for gender-equitable policies and practices;
- Holding departments to account for actively tackling and making progress against sexism and gender inequalities;
- Checking that your department has a public statement about not tolerating sexism;
- Asking your department and/or professional association to regularly review and address any gendered assumptions and representations in their curricula, materials and resources.

Contact the ASPIRES project:

www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/aspires

@ASPIREScience

aspires@ucl.ac.uk



Other useful links and resources:

‘It’s not about you’: how to be a male ally (theconversation.com)

9 ways men can become allies for equal rights (heforshe.org)

How Men Can Become Better Allies to Women (hbr.org)

7 Ways Men Can be Better Allies for Gender Equality | UNFPA MENENGAGE

Ways Gender-Privileged Men Can Challenge Sexism - The Good Men Project

stay-or-go-the-experience-of-female-engineers-in-early-career.pdf (imeche.org)

Endnotes

i This resource focuses on sexism but recognises that progress is urgently needed on ALL aspects of inequality (e.g. by race, social class, disability etc.) and that inequalities are intersectional, not discrete.

ii The ASPIRES project is funded by the ESRC and is based at UCL. Visit the **ASPIRES project** website for more details

iii For example, see the 2017 report by the Institution of Mechanical Engineers **stay-or-go-the-experience-of-female-engineers-in-early-career.pdf (imeche.org)**

iv The ASPIRES study uses self-reported gender identity – hence ‘women’ refers to students who self-reported as such. While this resource uses the term ‘women’ and ‘men’ we recognise the plurality and diversity of gender identities and the ongoing exclusion of the non-binary and trans community in STEM and society.

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UKRI Economic and Social Research Council

THE ROYAL SOCIETY

ROYAL SOCIETY OF CHEMISTRY

Institution of MECHANICAL ENGINEERS

IOP Institute of Physics

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