

Shadowed by sexism.

How gender inequality manifests in school community

Editor's note: *Indicates source would only agree to be interviewed with the condition of anonymity.

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“At the beginning of the year in Research Colloquium, I walked into class and one of the boys was like, ‘What are you doing here?’” Kira* said. “I was like, ‘Wow, I can’t be taking this class? Like, I get it. Maybe you’re smarter than me, but

like, I really can’t sit down and take the same class that you can?” Kira’s experience dealing with sexist behavior at the school is not uncommon. According to an online survey conducted by The Standard March 7-22 with 149 student responses, 61.1% of students believe sexism is a problem at ASL. However, many more have experienced or witnessed instances of sexism occur around the school, and countless of those stories remain unshared.

Origins of the problem

Olivia Holmberg (‘25) said the issue stems from the school’s limited ability to control the information students consume while on campus.

“Society as a whole has problems, so even if ASL does a really good job, kids are still going to be hearing all these other narratives from other places and taking that back to the school,” Holmberg said. “It’s a really hard issue to combat.”

Likewise, Assistant Principal Natalie Maisey said because “school is a microcosm of the world,” sexist culture is inescapable at ASL.

Ziad Ben-Gacem (‘25) said the wider world is a key factor in the ubiquity of sexism at ASL.

“It seems, both in ASL and in the world in general, there isn’t really a desire to think about equality and equity and where people are coming from and more a desire to play the victim,” Ben-Gacem said. “It’s a prevalent problem at ASL because it’s a prevalent problem in the world.”

In addition, Maisey said sexist culture is progressively intertwined with the growing presence of social media, ultimately heavily impacting students.

“What’s really difficult is that we do have social media influencing, I think, boys, particularly,” Maisey said. “There’s the lack of male role models that are really showing boys what manhood can look like.”

Moreover, Ben-Gacem said the presence of sexism on a global scale is exacerbated by social media due to the “incessant cycle of whataboutism” – a

response to wrongdoings by bringing up offenses committed by the other party – and competition over “which group is more marginalized.”

“That’s how you get people like Andrew Tate,” Ben-Gacem said. “It’s how you get people and movements that claim to advocate for gender equality that, in truth, just want to oppress the other group, and I think most of that is as a result of social media.”

Furthermore, Kira said the amplifying effect of social media in sexist culture impedes the school’s ability to limit the propagation of such ideologies.

“People are getting fed information that is not exactly positive, and I think having access to so much in the world, you’re obviously prone to getting more extremist or sexist ideals,” Kira said.

However, this deficit in male role models doesn’t just exist on social media. English Teacher Alissa Mears said she wishes “there was a little bit more leadership and space for boys to talk about issues of masculinity” at the school.

“Over the course of my time at ASL, there have been so many women’s and girl’s groups, which is great, right, where it gives space to talk about issues, concerns, trauma, all of that,” Mears said. “But, there’s not been made a space for boys to talk about that, and I think that would really benefit our community.”

Gus Bhatia (‘25) said for many students, a sexist mentality can materialize as “a product of growing up” and male students wanting “to feel like men.”

As an administrative leader, Designated Safeguarding Lead Richard Harrold said he views other individuals in positions of leadership as complicit in the problem.

“If you look at the highest forms of administration in the U.K. and other countries, we haven’t seen a lot of accountability and integrity,” Harrold said. “That does trickle down, you know, people see that and they say, ‘Well, he’s successful, he got away with it, I’m going to behave like that.’ That needs addressing. You need people in positions of power, in positions of authority, who are

demonstrating integrity.”

Sexist culture at ASL

Kira said while sexism at ASL is “surface level better” compared to other schools she has attended, many incidents occur under the radar.

“It appears to be a much better-handled topic than it is,” Kira said. “There’s a lot that goes on and happens that ASL doesn’t know about or doesn’t recognize or fully appreciate.”

Although the school may be unaware of the frequency of these incidents, Felix Destin (‘24) said the existence of a sexist culture is undeniable.

“There’s sort of no choice but to believe it because I’ve heard off my sister, off of my friends’ sisters, girls in class like a million times and through word of mouth that groups of boys will be systematically dismissive,” Destin said.

Though Destin said his awareness of sexism is magnified by having a sister, Kira said she struggles to break down the barrier between her experiences and those of her brother.

“[My brother] very much understands how prevalent sexism is and how much I am a feminist and all of that, but I think there’s a certain point where, when all the doors are closed and all the guys are together, the whole ‘boys will be boys’ thing does come into effect,” Kira said. “No matter how much I tell him, I can’t exactly control that. That’s just social commentary.”

Moreover, according to The Standard’s survey, 73.8% of students have experienced or witnessed stereotyping based on gender at ASL. Additionally, 63.8% of students and 58.4% of students have experienced or witnessed discriminatory language and students being bystanders to sexism, respectively.

However, Harrold said this pervasive, misogynistic ideology at the school is not a new phenomenon. In May 2022, Everyone’s Invited, an online forum in which students can document incidents of sexism and sexual harassment at schools across the U.K., publicized the names of the reported schools.

“You’re going to ask me if ASL was one of them,” Harrold said. “It was.”

Nowadays, Sara Kim (‘24) said the sexist culture at the school is characterized by perpetrators “trying to be hushed.”

“Most of the time, the sexism at ASL happens in whispers, and, a lot of the time, whispers are quite loud,” Kim said. “There are some people at ASL that sort of walk that boundary of slightly problematic, but not enough to feel like they can be called out.”

Similarly, Holmberg said there is “definitely a prevalence of sexism” throughout the school, particularly in the form of “jokes and small comments and remarks.”

“It’s more of a general culture where it’s just acceptable to make jokes and remarks at the expense of women,” Holmberg said.

From a teacher’s perspective, Mears said although she does not always bear witness to instances of sexism, there has been a recent increase in students mentioning such occurrences.

“I’ve heard about it more secondhand from people who have been concerned about things that have happened outside of the classroom and definitely have heard more, I would say, over the last year and a half, than prior to that,” Mears said.

Likewise, Maisey said students’ sexist comments reach the faculty’s ears, and the frequency of derogatory remarks made is hard to digest.

“The interesting trend is that, and it’s really difficult actually to hear this as a trend, but how often students at ASL are experiencing misogynistic microaggressions and those just being what feels like a typical part of the day,” Maisey said.

Yet, Kim said students face challenges in sharing sexist experiences due to society being “rooted in a misogynistic mindset.”

“You tell your experiences about sexism and then people are like, ‘Well, that’s not really sexism,’ because the comments that are made or the experiences that, at least, I’ve felt have been sort of pushing the threshold of sexism,” Kim said. “If someone says a comment to me that I’m like, ‘Oh, that’s not okay,’ then it feels like ‘But, oh, I can’t call that out’ because it’s not that blatantly sexist.”

When facing offhand sexist comments, Kira said she too struggles to speak up given the lack of positive consequences.

“There’s only so many times girls can keep calling out guys, and they won’t listen, but I think as soon as a guy calls out another guy, there’s like, I don’t know, there’s some sort of recognition there,” Kira said. “It’s sad that that’s the way it is, but I’ve witnessed guys calling out other guys and it actually causes some change in behavior versus when

I call it out, it’s just like, ‘Oh, of course she’s complaining about it.’”

Destin said when victims of derogatory comments confront the perpetrator, it can escalate to unsafe conditions, complicating the prevention of such comments.

“There’s subtle biases you can only work to give confidence to the person to go and push the boundaries of, but then the moments where it’s uncomfortable, that’s where there’s the risk of like, being emotionally or physically problematic,” Destin said.

Additionally, Kira said what can be described as casual remarks often hold a significantly heavier emotional burden for the victim.

“Offhand comments are definitely internalized by people,” Kira said. “I’ve internalized comments before and I think that’s something that is definitely restrictive because it’s something that you carry with you, which could affect your life.”

As students, Ben-Gacem said sexist culture is exacerbated by tendencies to lean toward extremism.

“There’s this stereotype that, you know, a f---boy will be misogynistic and not really care about women’s opinions, like, ‘Shut up, go to the kitchen,’ and then there’s also the idea of the, like, classic lesbian girl is an absolute man hater, you know, like, ‘All men are pigs,’” Ben-Gacem said. “Those are two extremes, you know, and because they’re extremes, they’re kind of ideals, and because of that, us being impressionable children, we tend to lean towards the extremes, so I think that is definitely something that is holding us back from

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“To change the fundamental outlook of a person is a very difficult thing, and I think to change the culture of a group of people is even harder ... You can only take a horse to the water, you can’t really make them drink it.”

– Gus Bhatia (‘25)



having conversations, just the general tendency to fall into a stereotype.”

Experiences & incidents at ASL

The result of the sexist culture at the school manifests itself in many different ways. Bhatia said he bears witness to curt comments made without proper understanding.

“You kind of hear a lot of uncomfortable, aggressive and strange language being used to refer to women or refer to girls in a way which, you know, for me listening, you wouldn’t like to hear that,” Bhatia said. “If people really understood kind of the ramifications, but also the meaning of what they said, that wouldn’t be as prevalent.”

In addition, Bhatia said a large group chat for male students has become a medium for the spread of sexist ideology.

“There have been instances in which pictures of girls from our grade have been pasted into [the group chat] and comments have been made, kind of fat-shaming, just really kind of commenting on a lot of girls’ physical appearances,” Bhatia said. “Honestly, I can’t even say I’m friends with the people who do that, but to be a peer of these guys is kind of embarrassing.”

Kira said even in-person sexist comments are frequent.

“At Bottom O, there’s a group of boys who spend time rating girls,” Kira said. “That’s been a thing for a long time, so it’s not, I guess, limited to ASL.”

Furthermore, according to The Standard’s survey, 63.1% of students said they have experienced sexism and 77.9% said they have witnessed instances of sexism at the school.

Within the classroom, Kim said problematic behavior is minimal as the school effectively “ensur[es] that there’s no systemic or built-in sexism in the curriculum.”

However, Naz Kaya (‘25) said while the innate nature of the curriculum promotes equality, it does not prevent sexism from taking place.

“The system is set up in a way that definitely considers men and women as

equals,” Kaya said. “But I think that sometimes personal beliefs or personal actions can come across differently depending on the individual.”

During a school trip, Kira said she once again witnessed derogatory comments made in a casual manner.

“There was this guy who got a girl’s number, and then he walked over to the other group of guys and was like, ‘Add one to the tally. That’s another one,’ and I was just like, ‘That’s really disgusting,’” Kira said. “There’s a lot of instances like that where it’s a little offhand.”

As a student who regularly participates in the theatrical and musical opportunities offered by the school, Ben-Gacem said he feels the impact of these sexist comments frequently.

“I’m in the musical,” Ben-Gacem said. “I do acting, I do band. I’m generally a very artsy kid. I think there is a lot of pressure around that, the idea that if you’re a guy doing arts, you’re either gay or soft or something of the sort.”

Furthermore, Ben-Gacem said coping with the resulting perceptions others have of him can be challenging.

“The fact that I sing in front of a lot of people, the fact that I act, the fact that I present myself as very emotionally vulnerable, I think, gives this

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