

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast, I'm your host Allison Tyra and today I'm joined by Samantha Schulz, an associate professor of the sociology of education at the University of Adelaide, to discuss how the manosphere is radicalizing young men and boys and specifically how this is playing out in classrooms at both the school and university levels. So first, just in case anyone is unfamiliar with the manosphere - lord, I wish that included me - but can you explain what that means?

SS: Yeah, certainly. So the manosphere is a composite, a collection of online groups, so websites and social media groups broadly unified by their anti-feminist, right-wing populist messaging. It is not new, it's existed since at least the early 2000s and from then up until now, taps into and revives much older patriarchal power structures. So in more recent years we've seen several cultural shifts as well as technological advancements that have resulted in the manosphere arguably intensifying both in strength and in reach. Firstly the #metoo movement which of course was initiated by the activism of Tarana Burke in 2006 but it was really the 2017 rise of the movement after Alyssa Milano, actress, encouraged women to share their experiences of sexual assault and harassment online that resulted in significant worldwide cultural traction and material impacts. So we saw powerful men in Hollywood, for instance Harvey Weinstein, finally being held to account for their decades of largely unfettered sexist and misogynistic behaviour and abuse. So #metoo sparked action. It raised awareness but it also resulted in a surge of anti-feminist backlash both on- and offline. So for instance, we had men saying that they were too scared, for example, of having one-on-one meetings with women for fear that they would become a #metoo victim, the implication being that women were liars when it came to things like sexual assault or harassment. You might remember Mike Pence in the US famously declaring that he wouldn't have dinner with any woman who wasn't his wife.

So #metoo really stirred up a lot of strong responses including backlash informed by the belief that women can't be trusted, that they lie about rape, that men are ultimately victims both of feminism and of this movement in particular. Online, these waves of backlash strengthened and more sharply defined the manosphere. If we then fast-forward to the COVID-19 pandemic around 2020, '21 we saw all people but particularly young people worldwide spending a lot more time online, bereft of the offline social interactions and moderation by people like teachers that they otherwise would have experienced and this is when many theorists suggest that this coincides with boys and young men particularly becoming more influenced by manosphere messaging.

AT: It's important to note as well that as you mentioned this isn't just sexism, because this is also getting into other far-right ideologies: racism, islamophobia, xenophobia and nationalism, homophobia, trans, just all the usual bullshit frankly that we see over and over again that men who are misogynists, and women who have internalized misogyny, also have these other harmful biases. So how are we seeing these things play out in the classrooms based on your research?

SS: Yeah, so touching on that point, maybe I'll start by explaining what some common manosphere messaging is, which is becoming normalized and then move on to how we see it surfacing in classrooms. So, common manosphere messaging includes, for example the idea that feminism or equity agendas more broadly are a conspiracy designed to oppress men. In other words, diversity-related curriculum within the space of formal education is really framed by this messaging as woke and politically extreme. Another message is that men are victims of current societal arrangements, that things were better before and that we need to return to that better time. That immigrants and cultural minorities are threats to the purity of nation-states like Australia, like the US. That social problems like poverty or insecure housing aren't outcomes of capitalism, but the ways in which women and minority groups are advancing at men's expense, that LGBTQIA+ people and single unmarried women are unnatural and therefore a threat to the natural order, and finally that masculine life is war and that boys and young men should defend this natural order and with force if necessary. So I think it's also worth noting before we get to what's happening in classrooms that when we consider who manosphere followers are, we're not talking about just a small number of fringe dwellers but millions, multiple millions of worldwide

followers with content that is now viewed billions of times and which tightly aligns with the kind of strongman politics we are seeing surfacing worldwide. So you can think of Trump, Putin. Secondly the manosphere and the way that it's co-opting scores of particularly Gen Z men worldwide and the radicalization strategies that it deploys really is altering the racial and gender politics of our time. So this is really significant. I will be rescaling the conversation to the context of individual classrooms, but we are talking about a global movement. As an illustration last year in Australia the Talbot poll calculated that around 43% of young Australian men said that they would have voted for Trump if they could. Much more recently, some research was carried out by Ipsos UK and the Global Institute for Women's Leadership at King's College London, and it stated that men and women belonging to Gen Z are in fact more divided than any other generation on key questions around feminism, gender roles and women's rights. This research was based on 30 countries, about 24,000 people and it was undertaken to mark International Women's Day 2025. And what they found really clearly is that while younger generations are often thought to be pretty supportive of efforts to advance gender equality, in reality the view of Gen Z men and women is often starkly divergent on these issues and of all the generations they surveyed, Gen Z opinion is most divided by gender on whether they define themselves as feminists, whether a man who stays at home to look after his children is less of a man, whether men are being expected to do too much to support equality and whether we've gone so far in promoting women's equality that we are purportedly discriminating against men. So you can see these kinds of ideas that are in high circulation across the manosphere are really manifesting in terms of polarized beliefs amongst young people.

AT: And I just have to point out how divorced that is from reality in terms of, the actual false reporting statistics do not bear out "oh women are lying about these things." And this idea that women are somehow taking over when, I mean particularly in the U.S. but I would say also in Australia, if you look at who is in charge in politics, in business, in media, it's still white guys.

SS: Yeah it certainly doesn't match with reality. It's almost as though it is another paradigm which is being promoted reproduced and then materializing in different ways. I can talk a little later around the strategies that are used to co-opt, to draw boys and young men into this alternate reality if you like, but no you're absolutely correct in that if we offer counterpoints grounded in live reality, clearly some of these this messaging is not stacking up to reality. Nonetheless it has become itself incredibly powerful.

AT: So I do want to get into the psychology around this as well, but getting back to your research, what are teachers seeing in the classroom? Because I would say that girls have been copying abuse and harassment from their male peers basically forever but we've seen this shift where the teachers are getting it as well now.

SS: Yeah, so I might start by providing some commentary from pre-tertiary settings, mostly high schools within the state where I'm currently located, South Australia, before I move on to the university sector and the kinds of reportage that is coming back to me from research participants from around Australia. So firstly in terms of classrooms, just to humanize this, these are quotes from largely female teachers in South Australia. And although these are individualized quotes, they really serve as a proxy for patterns that are playing out much more broadly both in South Australia but across Australia and internationally. So one female teacher says "students exhibit disrespectful behavior towards me because I am female. They won't follow instructions. They say things like 'make me a sandwich, you're just a woman.' I called the male deputy and their behavior changed straightaway and they behaved." Another female teacher says, "I was told by a student that he was an alpha male so he didn't have to listen to me." Another teacher another female, says "year seven male students were talking about how Andrew Tate is amazing. Then I had a male student from the same class explain to me that the reason the class was showing the relief teacher more respect than me was because the relief teacher was a man." And this is from another female teacher who says, "a group of middle school boys" so years seven to ten around ages 12 to 15 "consistently bark at me and other young female teachers or make

sexualized moaning sounds when we ask them to do something like get out their English books.” This teacher says, “Andrew Tate has been a really big influence on our year eight and nine boys to the point where they're covering their school books with photos of him and misogynistic quotes. I've been told to get back in the kitchen, get back in your box bitch. I'm constantly battling sex as racist and homophobic comments whilst trying to do my job.”

So they were all female teachers, and as I said these are proxies for broader patterns that are playing out but this next quote I think is important and I'd like to pause on, because it also is illustrative of some broader dynamics that we're seeing unfolding. So this is a male teacher who explained in interview, “I had to take over a class because a teacher quit because she was having sexually suggestive things said to her repeatedly by male students.” This was a group of older senior secondary male students. He goes on, “and leadership didn't deal with it, told us not to talk about it. So I just got on with my job. She quit and so did three other female teachers on the same day.” So the theme here is that we are seeing women teachers moving schools in search of safety or leaving the profession altogether, and this is happening amidst a crisis of teacher attrition in Australia. When this male teacher was asked, “well could you and the other teachers work together to address the upsurge in sexist incidents that are resulting in female teachers quitting?” the teacher then replied and this is also really important, “there's absolutely no way that it could be done. It takes too much time, the scale of the problem is too big and it is really tangential as far as our duties as teachers go.” And that teacher also went on to say that he wouldn't know what to do or say, he doesn't know how to address sexism and misogyny and wouldn't want to open the lid on some, he said, pretty confronting emotions, so it's best to do nothing. So what we can see here is a broader phenomenon or an aligned phenomenon in terms of institutional inaction deflection, minimization or denial. We have a leader here who's telling the teaching staff essentially, pretend it's not happening, move on, get on with your day. And this is also problematic the way that institutions are responding to, or not responding to, incidents when they surface.

AT: I have to say, I do understand where an individual teacher is coming from by saying “oh this problem is just too big,” because we do put so much on teachers and a lot of it is extra stuff that they aren't really paid for, it's all these other things that just sort of pile on top that isn't actually part of their main job. So I can sympathize with that, but my understanding is that there are female teachers who are taking actions to try and address these, and it may also be that for people like this male teacher and the women who quit that the larger issue is that they're not being supported by both the parents and the administrators. So that's a lot of topics that I just raised, so could we discuss first what some of the female teachers that you talk to have been doing that has proven effective and then get into what we are seeing the people in power, whether the individual power of a parent over their child, which I get that teenagers are difficult regardless and that authority is shrinking the older they get. But if we could get into first what is working for certain teachers who have decided to take this on, this additional unpaid labor and then getting into more of the systemic failings of the people in power who are not acting.

SS: Yeah, for sure. So you've covered here the institutional responses, the responses from parents, and then also the motivations of individual teachers. I think probably an appropriate way to respond to all of those dynamics is, what I might do first is consider institutional responses and how they create a context for particular responses by parents and teachers to then surface at the school level. And I will return to what is happening in university classrooms but at the school level in Australia, responses to sexism misogyny and other antisocial incidents oftentimes are pretty ineffectual, piecemeal, siloed, outsourced, ignored or left to individual teachers to resolve. But there is a history here that is important to understand and I'll just step through it really quickly because this provides a backdrop for everything else at the more localized levels that I would consider to be important. So firstly schooling in Australia, mass compulsory schooling which rolled out around the mid-1800s, was not designed by or for women or Aboriginal peoples or minoritized groups so culturally minoritized or other minoritarian groups. By the early 1900s, virtually all of our secondary schools in

Australia were segregated by sex and they were really only for white middle-class children. Now at that time educational theorizing was very strongly influenced by the theories of G. Stanley Hall, who some listeners might have heard of, a US psychologist who believed that gender is rooted in biology, that adolescence is a time when young people progress from savage to civil, but that really only boys, so in this case white boys in urban settings, could ultimately become civilized. He believed that boys are ambitious and need toughening up - so some familiar themes in the current moment. He also believed that girls are "weepy, prone to secrecy and lying and need protection." By the early 1970s in Australia, women were considerably less educationally qualified than men. By 1971, less than a third of university students were female and in fact the OECD said Australia's labor market was the most highly segregated by sex of any it had studied. By 1975, the Commonwealth Schools Commission acknowledged that schooling was in short sexist and reproduced the patriarchal dividend. This was also a time of feminist agitation and struggles, as we know, however, within and beyond schools. And these struggles did result in 1987 in Australia becoming in fact the first country to create federal initiatives for the promotion of gender equity in schools. By the early 1990s, this resulted in a groundbreaking plan called the National Action Plan for the Education of Girls. It had multiple priority areas, it had really strong federal funding and support.

However, mid-1990s, this also coincided with the rise to power of a highly conservative government. Some listeners will have heard of the Howard government who was in power for four consecutive terms, so nearly a decade. And the Howard government essentially sidelined equity agendas in schooling in favor of a much stronger focus on competition, standardization and retraction of funding to the public sector. So Howard co-opted a very conservative media at the time to argue that diversity agendas in schooling - so feminist, First Nations and multicultural advances diversity content - he framed them as threats to the educational rights of boys, who were in turn constructed as a vulnerable, homogeneous group, and essentially argued that schools were overly feminized, that feminism was to blame. And really since this time, the mid-'90s, gender equity or gender justice has largely remained absent in Australian schooling.

So we can say that schooling in Australia has become more masculinized and what I mean by this is that anything to do with gender justice has either been expunged or sidelined. And in its place we see much more competitive standardized curriculum and assessment mechanisms and they've become dominant. They've become naturalized. We often think of standardized tests - and you're right, they take up teachers' time - we think of them as being culturally neutral and fair owing to the fact that everyone takes them. But in reality they are standardized on white norms and they're tethered to a national curriculum and other policy frameworks in which references to gender justice are absent. So you will struggle to find gender, let alone gender justice, anywhere across Australia's major education policy frameworks. If we do hear about gender, it's usually reduced to equality of the sexes, which is problematic because that itself reproduces a binary framework. So in other words Australia's education system has in fact suffered from a decades-long policy vacuum around gender justice and it doesn't provide clear consistent intellectual resistance to the kinds of manosphere messaging that I mentioned earlier and it's never really responded adequately to everyday forms of sexism or misogyny these simply haven't been priority areas so in the sense when I say masculinism as a side note I'm talking about how institutions can be masculinist they can support subordinate sorry everyone to a masculine norm but without overtly privileging men and we see this in Australian schooling in terms of curriculum and testing instruments which are marketed as being culturally neutral when in fact they contain and reproduce a vacuum around gender justice. And it's through that vacuum that normalized sexist and problematic beliefs around gender and sexuality really have been able to go unchallenged largely. So we can think of this as everyday sexism or just everyday violence, which in turn I would argue creates the conditions for more blatant, out-of-the-ordinary, exceptional forms of gender-based violence that we're seeing surface now.

So in terms of, you also mentioned parents and how is parent responses to what's happening in schools shaping these relations. I would say a couple of things. Firstly, many Australian parents have been subjected to the same schooling characterized by a vacuum around gender literacy or gender justice. They've been subjected to the same everyday gendered violence, gender justice being absent in schooling. They've also

grown up in a world of gendered signs and symbols where everyday sexism and misogyny are oftentimes naturalized. We just have to look at the pandemic levels of domestic and family sexual violence in this country to know that we live in a highly sexist, dangerously misogynistic society already. And so this everyday naturalization of sexism and misogyny really creates the conditions for these more out-of-the-ordinary forms of sexism and misogyny to surface. But in the face of lack of resistance, so back to the question about parents before I get to what teachers are doing, I would say we can't really blame parents and make them the locus of the problem when in fact the problem is so much bigger. And I would also argue that young people, dependent upon their home circumstances, will tend to act differently at school than when they're at home and that is because school's a place where young people come together and they perform gendered identities for one another. And in order to fit in, this was really clearly exemplified by one of my research participants. So a teacher working at a school where his younger brother actually attends as a student. And he says, "the boy that I see at home is not the person that I see at school. He totally changes." And this came from a research participant who lives in a highly gender- and sexuality-safe home where diversity is naturalized.

I'll give you one more comment, and this is from a teacher respondent, a female working in a low-SES (socioeconomic status) school with young people coming from really highly complex trauma backgrounds, to give you an idea of the way in which some parents are reproducing the problematic ideas we're seeing surface in the manosphere. So this is a lengthier quote but I think worthwhile noting. The teacher says, the student kept coming to school late and eventually when she questioned the young man why he was coming to school late, he turned around and said, you need to fuck off, bitch." She says, "so I met with the father, and he immediately kicked off. He said, 'you fat bitch,' called me a slut, 'women are only good for bedding, they're not much good for anything else.' And I said, 'well, now we know where your son gets it.' He looked at me. He said, 'you can't speak to me like that, I'm his father.' So I said 'well I'm his teacher and I'm female and I don't need to be spoken to like that.' He leaned across the desk. 'Well, girly,' he said, and I'm not that tall but I stood up and said, 'one, do not lean across the desk at me. And two, if you don't want to be thrown out on your ear, I suggest you sit down.' He kicked the chair. A male teacher stepped in. The dad turned around and said to that teacher, 'can you just tell this fucking bitch to pull her head in? She just needs someone to fuck her.'"

So you can see from this comment, and this is a rather extreme one, but young people are coming from a diversity of backgrounds and they don't leave these backgrounds at the door when they come to school. So the ways in which schools are responding to sexist misogynistic racist anti-social language and behaviors really becomes quite critical crucial in terms of moderating behavior and performing that social function and seeing this as central to the work of schooling

AT: So in terms of what people can be doing, whether that is the parents because I think first and foremost the parents need to believe and listen to the teachers, I would say. As the person who has not been researching this, that seems like a big first step because it does sound like even the ones who are not like that *gentleman* you described, they don't want to believe that it's their kid. And that makes them a lot less likely to even try to address it. And do you think part of it is just this is such a big complex problem that it's intimidating to people who should be addressing it on individual and broader levels?

SS: I think when we consider the response of the male teacher earlier who was told by leadership, "pretend it's not happening, just get on with your job" and then that teacher turned around and said "the scale of the problem is too big and I wouldn't know what to do anyway," that really speaks to the reality that if you have an institution like the institution of schooling that is not taking this on as a core part of the work of schooling and supporting teachers in this work, then you do have an entire system that is enabling sexist, misogynistic, anti-social language behaviors and encounters to reproduce, to be perpetuated. This is not to say that this work can't be done and that there aren't teachers who are doing this work. And I can provide you with a pretty clear illustration of the ways in which some teachers are choosing to rigorously engage in this work, but the cost that this can come at. So this example is from a teacher who at the time of interview had been in the

profession for 12 years, and like other participants in my research had noticed a really stark increase in the number of sexist and misogynistic encounters at her school. So she works in a regional or a country area which she described in interview as “a farming community where most of our students are in very traditional male-dominated households, where women stay at home. They do the caregiving roles and the men go out and work. So the gender binary is really ingrained.” So you can see here that this is a social context where ideas around gender-normative dominant ideas of the gender binary being natural. And these are the ideas we are hearing reproduced through the manosphere is already deeply enculturated across the community. So teaching against that grain is already going to be challenging, and if you're a teacher that's operating in a vacuum doing this work, then you're quite likely looking at teaching against the grain of what students are bringing with them into school and what parents have grown up believing, knowing, performing as natural. So like the other respondents I mentioned earlier in the study, this teacher had noticed a really alarming rise in sexism and misogyny across the student body in recent years. In fact in 2023, she was assaulted by a young man who was aged 16. Now despite this incident and despite pushback from parents concerning what she taught, this teacher remained really passionate about incorporating diversity-related content into her curriculum. But she said, “I do it under the radar without upsetting parents. I tread really carefully.” So the fact that this teacher has to tread carefully speaks to a lack of structural support around this work. Nonetheless she actually decided and she provided a wonderful example, she decided to include the *Barbie* film into her year 11 English curriculum because she wanted to explore the representations of masculinity in the film. And she said “one of the boys and this is in this country area said, ‘I hate this movie.’ So I said, ‘well let's focus on what happens with Ken - why does he suddenly believe this is okay?’” Ken was treating Barbie poorly. “Look at his behavior - who do you think he's modeling?’ The student said, ‘well, I can see that he's modeling people like Andrew Tate. He's treating women like objects.’ And I said, ‘well what did he need?’ He said, ‘Ken needs to rely on friendships. He needs to develop relationships with other Kens.’ Then that student stopped and reflected. ‘well I used to do that.’ And then we had this really great conversation just with the boys, ‘do you have friends that you talk to about things that matter?’ And a couple of them shared, ‘no I only talk to my girlfriend.’ And I asked, ‘well is there an issue with that? Do you think that we should broaden this out?’ And we went down the ‘well, what do you think? What are boys listening to Andrew Tate?’ Some of them,” this teacher said, “I feel like I really did make some progress in understanding how these views are damaging to them and to the people around them. With others, I couldn't get through.”

So this is just a snippet of an insight into this teacher's daily life at the chalk face. She provides a clear example of the kind of teaching that does create a context in which all students can start to engage in critical self-reflection. I would say that she's using a form of relational pedagogy form of teaching that's informed by an ethic of gender justice and it creates the conditions for the young men in her classroom to start to experience transformations in subjectivity that are really useful. And this is despite teachers like the male respondent I mentioned earlier saying that there's no way that this work could be done. Instead I would argue, based on my research, this work is being done but it comes at a cost to the individual teachers who choose to incorporate gender justice under the radar against mounting backlash because they're not supported institutionally. And dependent upon where they're located, they may not be supported in terms of community and community social relations relations with parents as well.

AT: And so I know we said we were going to get into university and now we're going to get into university, because obviously these teenage boys are now becoming young men because that's how aging works. And so these same kids, which I'm reluctant to call them that because some of them are adult men, but I feel like you're still not really a fully formed adult at 19 and 20 for the most part. So however we're referring to them, how are we seeing these behaviors then playing out at the university level? Because I'm also curious about the response and how the response may be different in university as opposed to a high school setting.

SS: So the first phase of my research has really been looking at what's happening in pre-tertiary classrooms

but I know that these kinds of dynamics have been surfacing in the university sector as well. So over the past 2024 to 2025, we've broadened the research to look at the university sector across Australia. Just called for any university academics who teach and they might research as well to let us know if they have also witnessed a rise in sexist, misogynistic, anti-social language/behaviors amongst their student cohorts. For the most part, the academics who have responded to that call, and phase one is an anonymous online survey and then I've asked for any academics who would also be interested in a longer form in-depth interview to also get in touch. And I have been having more and more mostly women academics reaching out. And for the most part these academics teach diversity-related content across disciplinary areas. So they might be in politics, in human resource management, in initial teacher education, humanities, etc.

And here are some direct quotes from these academics. So this is mostly 2025. This is a female academic in teacher education who says, "every year I consider just not teaching anything about gender equality or diversity to avoid the grief but on I go again. I try and use these hot moments as teaching moments, but I don't think this works." This is a female academic in politics who wrote in to say, "last week a student expressed the opinion that it's okay to persecute lesbian and gay people because they do not have children, they contribute nothing to society just like childless single straight women, therefore they don't deserve the protection of the law." Another academic, also female, in humanities offered, "the anti-LGBTQIA backlash from students really shook me. There've been several examples of transphobia, homophobia, misogyny in my classes, especially in recent years. Managing these interactions in class is getting increasingly difficult as opinions are becoming more polarized." So I've had a number of different academics reaching out and providing their feedback and oftentimes they're saying, "I've stopped challenging students because I fear the backlash. I also fear the feedback because I'm on probation" and students comment on their teachers by way of student evaluations of teaching. And this has surfaced as a particularly significant point across this portion of the data, I'll give you an example. So this female academic in business offers, "student evaluations are a real problem in this context. They have always been problematic but with an evermore polarized discourse and the necessity to take firmer stands in class, which make you inevitably unpopular with some students. It is now completely unacceptable for universities to continue using these tools to evaluate performance." So I could go on and on there have been increasing numbers of academics reaching out to share their stories.

One of the ways that universities have responded to these kinds of incidents in the past, even though they are escalating now, is to scrub student evaluations of teaching of notably sexist, racist, homophobic comments. It is worth noting and I'll just find the report, in recent years there has been some fairly wide-scale surveys in terms of student evaluations of teaching undertaken in the Australian context. So this one was undertaken by Troy Heffernan. It was a survey of nearly 700 academics one of the largest evaluations of student evaluations to take place and the research found really clearly that the highest volume, most derogatory threatening abuse that is surfacing across these evaluations is directed towards women and minoritized academics. We know that this is nothing new, but we also know that post-Covid and in concert with the rise of the manosphere, these kinds of weaponization of student evaluations have intensified. We know that student evaluations are influenced by racist, sexist, homophobic prejudices and biases against distinct discipline and subject areas as well. We know that nowadays the kinds of courses that are attracting the greatest amount and intensity of backlash are courses where diversity-related content, otherwise considered "woke" or politically extreme is what is brought to the center of curriculum. So in terms of a response, some universities as I said scrub really obviously abusive comments, but this is costly and it's also problematic because a system-generated scrub is not going to capture or recognize the different ways that sexism and misogyny surface. But this study also gave an example of the kinds of backlash that are manifesting by student evaluations the most explicit commentary of this kind is sexist and misogynistic. So here's an example where a tutor is called a bitch, another one an ugly fat cow, another one "so-and-so should be scared in a dark alley" and finally "this tutor dresses too revealing and is a cunt." So we know that this kind of evaluation of teacher performance is problematic. It affects the well-being as well as the job progression of academics who teach this content. We also know that the academics who teach diversity-related content tend to be women or minoritized academics

who are often nowadays working in isolation. So universities do need to be doing more to make sure that the university classroom is a safe space for everyone. As yet the kinds of responses that might occur to ensure that happens have yet to transpire.

AT: And I just want to clarify, when you're talking about these comments get scrubbed, I'm guessing there is no actual repercussions. Are the universities actually doing anything to tell these people who are legally adults, who are being prepared to go out into the world where they will presumably get jobs - and represent the universities by the way. Are the universities doing *anything* to show these young men there are repercussions and consequences for saying these kinds of things, particularly about someone in a position of authority?

SS: Student evaluations, when students fill them out, they are under the impression that they are completely anonymous. Now I do believe that some universities do have mechanisms in place where they can trace the comments and they could follow up with this work. It doesn't necessarily mean that it is being done. To my knowledge, and I don't want to speak out of turn, to my knowledge very little is being done in terms of redressing the situation and providing that kind of not only intellectual resistance to the surfacing of these ideas but also consequences. This is despite the fact that, February of 2024, all education ministers did sign the action plan addressing gender-based violence in higher education, which clearly states that all violence, regardless of who uses it and who experiences it, is unacceptable. So universities are mandated if you like to ensure that university classrooms and the campuses are safe spaces. However, again that doesn't necessarily mean that for teachers who are teaching diversity-related content, that they are any more supported, that there's any more institutional funding and recognition of this kind of work. And that is in part because universities themselves under neoliberal transformations of the past 30 years have had to operate like businesses in order to stay afloat because they don't receive the kind of federal funding that they used to and that means that areas that are more amenable to outside funding and industry partnerships like the hard sciences tend to be more prized epistemically. So in terms of the knowledge that they produce and engage with but also in real material terms within the context of universities, diversity-related content is not considered a lucrative industry area. And so those areas tend not to be as prized within the context of higher education and that's why, as I mentioned earlier, the academics who are teaching this content may be doing so in isolation. And it's also surfaced across the research that some academics are feeling this kind of backlash that arguably stems from or is related to in some ways the rise of the manosphere and the ways in which the manosphere is really shaping young people's beliefs around race, class, gender, etc. But other academics don't experience the impress of the world as gendered violence and so it's not something that is necessarily going to be on the radar of university leaders, who tend not to be women or minoritized academics who are teaching diversity-related content. So these kinds of events may not be on the the radar of those at the upper levels who might have some kind of structural capacity to respond in a much more rigorous way.

AT: So I'd like to get into the psychology a bit here, in terms of what is making boys and young men susceptible to this and then what are the psychological impacts this is having on, not just the teachers but also the female students? So I guess I'm curious about the psychology of both the cause and effect of what we're seeing here.

SS: Yeah, yeah. So because I'm a sociologist I am less likely to provide a psychologized response that attempts to discern why boys and young men are or are not engaging with critical self-evaluation and why they might be susceptible to manosphere messaging. What I can do is floodlight the institutional conditions, the institutional, infrastructural, cultural, social conditions that create the context where these kinds of behaviors and languages are enabled to surface. But also I might just firstly wheel back to the manosphere messaging, and how it is that increasing numbers of boys and young men worldwide are being radicalized into, lured into these kinds of belief systems. And I'll start by establishing that because of its networked nature - so the manosphere is a number of different online groups - the manosphere has really created the conditions for what



is known as manosphere celebrities or manfluencers to surface. Colleagues whose work I follow in this space are many, but among them, Steph Wescott and Steve Roberts from Monash University in Victoria say that by far the most influential among the manfluencers is Andrew Tate. Now his name is coming up a lot across my research with teachers in schools. For anyone who hasn't heard of Andrew Tate, although I'm sure that most people have by now, he's a former kickboxer and reality TV star who more recently faced charges for rape and human trafficking in Romania. But he has now, along with his brother Tristan, arrived in the US after his travel ban was lifted. So Tate is a self-professed misogynist and manfluencer whose penchant for right-wing populism, anti-immigration, strongman masculinity and sensationalist messaging resonates very strongly with the likes of Trump and his proclivities and policy position. And I was quoting directly there from Steph and Steve over at Monash. Much of Tate's content is just flagrantly misogynistic clickbait. He says things like "women belong in the home," "women can't drive," "rape victims are responsible for their attacks." So really emotionally charged clickbait that draws boys and young men in. Now whilst his front-facing content is this outrageous clickbait, it is actually his longer-form content that again sociologists like Steve Roberts and other colleagues say should be drawing our analytic attention, because this longer form content is much more moderate or seemingly reasonable. It's often about self-help and personal development for men that is much harder to challenge, much easier for boys and young men to weaponize against women, including their female teachers in school and at university, even though this content remains deeply grounded in misogyny. And these strategies are strategies of extremist groups. Clickbait draws people in and then seemingly logical, well-rationalized longer form arguments in the absence of any counterarguments do that deeper work of enculturation into the belief systems that I mentioned earlier.

And I might add that key targets for this kind of co-optation into the manosphere of boys as young or even younger than 12 years of age. And in Australia, that's the age that young people now start high school. So I suppose in a way in terms of the psychology, some reasons that boys are being drawn into these worlds is that the content plays on their insecurities. For example, pressure to live up to standards of heterosexual masculinity, not feeling attractive enough, sporty enough or popular enough or sexually successful enough with girls or young women. If anyone out there has watched the recent Netflix show called Adolescence, it really focuses on these dynamics explicitly. Young boys and men might see the manosphere site as a place where they can deal with these vulnerabilities under the cloak of anonymity where they can get advice and handle their relationship failures and work on their bodies and their selves. But at the same time they're also getting a sense of community, a sense of identity whilst they're supposedly learning to meet standards of masculinity but the messages that they're being fed tend to promote solutions that really reproduce the very same norms of heterosexual masculinity that have caused their predicament in the first place. So we can say that boys and young men are getting lured into the manosphere by way of strategies that have been noted as the same strategies of extremist groups. And then in terms of the broader institutional frameworks that they're then immersed in every day. Like schools, as I mentioned earlier, schools really aren't providing strong intellectual resistance and counterpoints to this messaging. So in terms of the psychology of how and why boys are getting hooked into the manosphere, oftentimes it's because of feelings of vulnerability and confusion around their identities. And this would suggest that they are engaging in self-examination but they're looking for answers in dangerous spaces and perhaps in part as I said because schooling really provides a vacuum around this stuff.

Secondly in terms of understanding the psychology of what's going on, that is where I look at spaces like schooling where sexist incidents are occurring and I would ask, what are the conditions of possibility that allow these incidents to happen? Again my attention turns to structural conditions of Australian schooling, the likes of which I mapped out earlier which are characterized by a policy vacuum around this stuff. Now that said, as I mentioned there are teachers who are engaging in this really complex and necessary work of opening out fruitful conversations with young people around masculinities, femininities, gender and so forth and often so, they'll be doing this without institutional support, without enough time, without enough local level support and sometimes in the face of pretty significant backlash themselves. So it is not a psychological response but the

way that I look at it, my colleagues look at that, we look at the ways that schools provide a cultural institutional context where either young people are engaging in really important work around masculinities and femininities and that work is central to the work of schooling and teachers, or it's happening in a policy vacuum. And in Australia right now, and it's the same with universities, there is a broader vacuum around gender justice than there is around the important work of engaging with young people and providing those counterpoints to manosphere messaging.

AT: And so that's the cause - did we want to get into the effects psychologically that the female teachers and female students, because I also want to point out here as well that teaching is already an under-resourced field to begin with and I have to assume that losing more teachers, because last I checked women do make up the majority of teachers, I have to assume this isn't going to be good for education as a whole in any way but on the individual level, what is this doing to the teachers and the female students?

SS: So the kinds of commentary that we're receiving from female teachers in schools, pre-tertiary settings but also female academics in the tertiary sector oftentimes, but for the most part these responses are highly emotionally charged. One quote in particular, so this is a female academic and initial teacher education, she says "behaviors've grown progressively worse from largely Anglo-Australian cohorts of young pre-service teachers. These young men sit exclusively in groups. They isolate students from other cultural backgrounds. They watch sporting matches during class. They do online betting on their phones. They don't like female tutors to talk about Aboriginal education or inclusion, but hide these sentiments until anonymous feedback is due. Then they write about their tutor being dangerous or opinionated, and woke and say that politics shouldn't be part of education." The same teachers are saying things like, "I feel sick entering the classroom. I can't teach the way I want to anymore. I fear the feedback, I fear the backlash." So this really is affecting not only the teachers who are absorbing this backlash and it is impacting on health, well-being and also we can add career progression. But when these kinds of incidents surface, it's really important that teachers show allyship with those in the room in real time. Otherwise students in the class, the collective of students aren't going to feel safe and supported in that context either. And that's really complex tricky work to do. So yes, these dynamics are absolutely having effect a psychological impact on the teachers who were trying to teach diversity-related content, inclusive education content. It is having an impact on the collective of students in the room and yes, it is contributing toward the crisis of teacher attrition that we're seeing in Australia at this time. And at the university level, some of our respondents are also saying that they've absorbed as much as they can and are considering leaving the profession or some who have engaged in interviews with us have already left as a consequence as well. So really, psychological and material impacts.

AT: So part of the issue psychologically is that much more broadly women are often, I would say gaslit. We are treated as though we are the problem anytime we raise a problem. And you see this across all different areas, it's not just this. It's a much more ingrained issue and my understanding is that a lot of the teachers that you've talked to, if they are in isolation, if they are not having other particularly women because we've talked about male administrators and possibly other teachers minimizing this, saying "just ignore, just pretend it's not happening, just deal with it." And that kind of minimizing feedback, if that's all you're getting, it does become this question of, "is this just me? Am I the crazy one, essentially? Am I being too sensitive?" whatever the case may be. So that isolation and not having other people to talk to, because you've talked about how teachers were asking you for this, like you would come and talk about something unrelated and they would be pulling you aside to say, "this is what I'm going through." And that seems like a very literal cry for help. How is that lack of community and communication with other teachers who are experiencing the same thing and who *aren't* minimizing it, how is that making it harder for these teachers to deal with it?

SS: Yeah absolutely. So in the absence of knowing that this is also happening to other people and if you are

working in isolation and as I said, because of the institutional structure of higher education, but also the ways that teachers in schools, the way that bodies are organized is that you will have one teacher to 30 students and teachers work in isolation from one another. In the absence of knowing that these kinds of events are happening to others as well, teachers do absorb the sense that “perhaps I've done something wrong.” A female academic reached out to me the other day upon hearing about the research that my team and I are undertaking and said “oh my goodness, I want to be part of this study. Whilst it is disappointing to read about what's happening to other academics, I feel vindicated. I have always wondered if it was something about me that attracted that kind of behavior - am I too soft? Am I too stern? Am I too this, am I too that? What am I doing wrong? I feel like every student should read this paper.” And that was a paper that was a small piece published in *The Conversation* some weeks ago around the rise of manosphere encounters in university classrooms. So when asked if they feel supported by their institutions or what specifically is being done when challenging encounters arise in university classrooms, most of our respondents have really described feeling insufficiently supported or, as you mentioned institutionally gaslit, saying things like “nothing is ever done, campaigns get swept under the rug or staff who are experiencing bullying harassment or mistreatment are made to feel that they don't know how to handle the situation.” So academics are really collectively speaking, and this is mostly women academics who teach diversity-related content speak of feeling alone, experiencing anxiety and exhaustion and these are the lived experiences of how these events play out and have impacts on individuals' health but also to the sector, it has an impact on the sector as well

AT: Now Ijeoma Oluo's *Mediocre: The Dangerous Legacy of White Male Power*, which is incredible, highly recommend you go read it to anyone who hasn't already. She talks about how when you're told you can be anything and all or almost all of the superheroes, billionaires, political leaders etc. look like you but then you don't live up to that supposed potential, many people will look for someone to blame, regardless of whether that actually makes any sense. And typically I would assume it feels safer to direct that anger down towards people who are more marginalized than yourself rather than up towards those who are actually responsible, much less looking inwards for critical self-examination. But what's interesting here when we're talking about are you attacking up versus down is that these women are in positions of authority. But the power of that authority that they are meant to have as teachers is not protecting them, largely because they are not supported by the power structures that they are meant to be part of, but also because of that lack of consequences. So their authority is being outweighed by their marginalization as women or people of color etc.

SS: Yeah, so if we go back to the common manosphere messaging that I highlighted earlier, and what this messaging and what these online worlds do is establish both in-groups and out-groups and collective political enemies, if you like. And those enemies tend to be anyone coded feminine. That doesn't just relate to women but also to non-white groups to LGBTQIA+ peoples to immigrants, are all positioned as problematic but also lesser than, because this is about gendered power that puts particular groups supposedly normatively at the top of a fixed social hierarchy that is rooted in biology. So that messaging is that feminism and equity agendas are a conspiracy designed to oppress men, that men are victims of current societal arrangements, that immigrants and cultural minorities are threats to the purity of places like Australia, that social problems like poverty or insecure housing or the problems that young men are experiencing in their relationships at a crucial time of growing up, are the fault of women, girls, minority groups who are advancing at men's expense, or in terms of incel groups that girls only like boys who are alpha and the rest of the boys are being looked over. Also that LGBTQIA+ people are unnatural and that masculine life is war.

So this kind of messaging positions, for example, teachers who are, as you say, older than and in a position of authority in aspect of boys and young men, are still positioned within this gendered framework as lesser than boys and young men and that it's the role of boys and young men to reinforce that natural order which should see them at the top, and to do so with force, to do so in groups that are designed to engage in language and behaviors that intimidate and put women back in their place so to speak. So we are seeing these dynamics

occurring. But as you mentioned, it's also happening within the context of institutional spaces where strong consistent counterpoints to manosphere messaging to these ideas that boys should be superheroes, billionaires, political leaders, as you said, is really not happening as the core work of schooling. And I would argue that it is part of the core work - if schooling has a social function, then this is the kind of work that we should be doing in order to create safe, inclusive communities, because schools engage in the work of nation building we produce tomorrow's societies and the hierarchies contained therein.

So in terms of these dynamics that you have illustrated and the fact that women teachers and other marginalized educators aren't feeling protected, it is twofold. It's because of this messaging, but it's also because institutions like schooling aren't providing intellectual resistance to these ideas because gender equity, gender justice really is positioned as a sideline to the main event in schooling. And as you said earlier, teachers' time is colonized, it's co-opted. What is considered to be the main event in schooling, much more important things like standardized testing and the curriculum to which those testing mechanisms are tethered, so for teachers who do engage in this work, as I mentioned earlier, they're doing so oftentimes under the radar, against mounting backlash, not with strong collegial support and certainly not in terms of this kind of work being taken on and embraced as a whole of school initiative.

We do have in Australia now consent and respectful relationships education, and this has been mandated as part of the Australian curriculum although it's still opt-in for certain religious and independent schools. And whilst this is a welcomed development, certainly the research that I've been undertaking and the research that is surfacing across other parts of Australia demonstrates that consent and respectful relationships education isn't being embraced as whole school imperatives. Often it's kind of sidelined it's funneled into pastoral care or in areas of the curriculum that are considered to be of lesser importance like health and PE, the main area where this is taught and teachers don't necessarily feel confident in delivering this content really confidently. So some schools in an endeavor to demonstrate that they're doing something will then outsource a so-called problem and this is where we're seeing young entrepreneurs like the Man Cave, like the Resilience Project, Daniel Principe are coming in and for considerable costs are undertaking this work, but more as a one-off and we know that one-off piecemeal endeavors are ineffectual. So I would argue that this is not the solution to a really complex social problem. We actually need to have curriculum around gender justice as mainstreamed in Australian schooling. That is what would ultimately underpin cultural change

AT: Well, let's dig into that further because it can be really exhausting to talk about, this is a huge complex problem that is actively hurting, I would say the boys and young men as well as obviously any women and girls around them. So if someone came to you, and I'd like to get into a couple different kinds of stakeholders if you want to I guess go through them one by one. If a teacher, if a parent, if a high school administrator, or a university high-level administrator, if a minister of education or other person in government who is in a position to do something - if any of these people came to you and said, "what can I do to push for change?" If you want to just go through each type of stakeholder that I mentioned and give them advice because hopefully somebody will listen and do something because I'm not in a position of power to change this.

SS: Yeah, I think that for all of those stakeholders, we first need to acknowledge and admit that the kinds of institutional responses that we have seen in schools and in universities for that matter to date have largely been ineffectual, piecemeal, siloed, outsourced, ignored or left to individual teachers to resolve. And this is not working, this is not an adequate response to this situation which is a cultural problem. And widespread cultural problems really require complex, collective responses and education is really important here. So at the micro level of schooling, I would say that teachers, so this is the interactional level of what happens in the classroom, teachers can engage young people in really productive pedagogies that are informed by gender justice. This work should not be outsourced. This should be part of the main role of all teachers. However this work must be supported at the macro level of schooling through robust policy frameworks that incorporate current notions of genders and sexualities and situated practices that are inclusive respectful and responsive, and I am quoting

Gannon there directly, who's written a lot around this field.

Initial teacher education providers also however need to be less shackled by the constraints of arguably very conservative orientations to schooling that have been the norm in Australia since, if you think back to that potted history of Australian schooling policy that I opened out earlier, since at least the mid-1990s, we have been moving in a much more competitive, individualistic conservative orientation to schooling that hamstring teachers. It means that they have less autonomy in terms of how they're engaging with the young people in their care. So initial teacher education providers, and by that I mean universities, schools of education need to be less shackled by these constraints so that gender justice pedagogies that are informed by critical theorizing, sociological theorizing can be part of all emergent teachers' knowledge base. This should be part of the absolutely fundamental knowledge base of all future teachers. However, we have to take seriously the consequences for the gap around gender justice in Australian school policy and an initial teacher education policy, not simply for teachers and their well-being, not simply for students who are experiencing the impact of this misogynistic backlash, this surfacing of the mansphere in classrooms, but for widespread coexistence. So I'm talking about schools and classrooms and university classrooms but this actually impacts all of society. So we need to understand that schooling is a space where important democratic work happens. It should happen. We need to take seriously what's happening in the space of classrooms, in the pre-tertiary and tertiary sectors, not simply for teachers and students but actually for the social fabric.

So put simply, I would argue that formal education spaces are some of the last places where informed social critique and engagement across differences should be nurtured and these are vital elements of a healthy democracy. Formal education at all levels should provide strong intellectual resistance to the polarized beliefs that we're seeing amplified by our digital worlds. One of the responses of policymakers at the local level has been to ban social media. I would argue that is insufficient. Women and minority academics and teachers are doing this work but increasingly they're carrying it alone. They are reporting that they feel isolated, burnt out and targeted by students who are labeling them as woke or politically extreme. And these dynamics are going to intensify. The Trump administration made clear its blatant more on "woke" in higher education. So we need to be taking this seriously at all of the educational levels. We need a strong policy position on this. Teachers at all levels need to be supported in this work. That's pre-tertiary and tertiary fields, and I would say it's because our social fabric really depends on it.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.