

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_YnZEqQ6DMY

92% of women feel concerned for their safety when on a run.

An activity that should be freeing quickly becomes a mental checklist: is my phone charged? Who's around? Is the path lit?

Safety shouldn't be a strategy.

It's time to change how we show up around women.

Good morning everyone,

2026 marks **115 years since the first International Women's Day**.

115 years ago, in 1911, women across Europe and beyond gathered to demand something radical at the time: basic rights.

They weren't fighting for social media equality.

They weren't arguing about dress codes.

They were fighting for the right to vote.

The right to work.

The right to be paid fairly.

The right to be treated as full human beings under the law.

In the UK, women couldn't vote until 1918 and even then, only some women. Full voting equality didn't come until 1928. That's within living memory. That's someone's great-grandmother.

So when we talk about International Women's Day, we're not talking about ancient history. We're talking about change that happened because ordinary people refused to accept unfairness.

And because of that courage, girls in this room can sit GCSEs.

Apply to university.

Play professional sport.

Start businesses.

Become doctors, engineers, prime ministers.

We have made extraordinary progress.

But progress does not mean the work is finished.

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Today, women still earn less on average than men for similar work. Women are underrepresented in leadership roles in politics and business. Women's sports receive significantly less funding and media coverage. And violence against women and girls remains a serious issue in the UK.

But I want to bring this closer to home.

Many girls your age will experience sexism before they leave school.

Sometimes it's obvious.

Sometimes it's subtle.

Sometimes it's disguised as "just a joke".

And that's where I want us to think carefully.

Often when we hear the word sexism, we think of extreme things - harassment, assault, abuse. And yes, those are serious and they matter deeply.

But harmful attitudes don't start at the extreme.

They start small.

They start with comments like:

"Girls are bad drivers."

"She's too emotional."

"She only got that because she's pretty."

"Who's the man in the relationship?"

"She should smile more."

Comments that get brushed off as banter.

Now here's the important thing - most people who say things like that don't think they're being harmful. They're repeating things they've heard. They're laughing along. They're fitting in.

I know during these assemblies, people will often share a big life experience with you. However, sexism is not often large moments or big blow ups. It's the women in the family cleaning up after christmas day lunch, it's being called a bitch rather than a strong leader, it's teenage boys on the tube loudly rating women's appearances, it's the mature age university student who requested a "more appropriate" mentor teacher when he realised I was a younger female, it's the "text me when you get home okay" to your girlfriends and calling them continuously when they forget. Just in case.

Culture is built from small moments.

When stereotypes are normalised, disrespect becomes easier. When people are talked about like objects, it becomes easier to treat them like objects. And when we ignore smaller forms of disrespect, we create space for bigger ones.

International Women's Day is not about blaming boys. It's not about saying girls are perfect and boys are the problem.

It's about recognising that we all grow up in a culture that feeds us stereotypes - and we all have a choice about whether we repeat them or challenge them.

And that brings me to this year's theme: **"Give to Gain."**

It's a simple idea.

When you give respect, you gain trust.

When you give support, you gain stronger communities.

When you give fairness, everyone gains opportunity.

Giving support doesn't mean posting once on Instagram and forgetting about it.

It means everyday actions.

It means calling out stereotypes - even when it's slightly awkward.

It means not laughing at a degrading joke.

It means questioning bias - "Why do we assume that?"

It means celebrating women's success without minimising it.

It means encouraging girls to take leadership roles.

It means not reducing someone to how they look.

And here's something really important:

Gender equality is not something that benefits only women.

When girls feel safe and respected, schools are safer for everyone.

When we challenge stereotypes, boys also gain freedom - freedom from the pressure to "man up", not show emotion, or prove themselves constantly.

Equality doesn't take something away from one group to give to another.

It raises the standard for everyone.

So what does this look like for you - realistically?

It might look like:

Choosing not to rate someone's appearance.

Supporting girls' sports fixtures with the same energy as boys'.

Encouraging a friend to apply for something even if they doubt themselves.

Interrupting a stereotype by saying, "That's not really fair."

Being aware of how you speak about people when they're not in the room.

None of that requires a protest march.

It requires awareness.

115 years ago, women were fighting for the right to be heard at all.

Today, you already have a voice.

The question is: how will you use it?