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Tracey Spicer, a broadcast journalist in Australia for more than 20 years, is no stranger to the sexist aside nor the cut and thrust of a busy newsroom. One of her favourites is overhearing a colleague saying: "You can’t trust anything that bleeds for five days and doesn’t die."

When she watched prime minister Julia Gillard accuse her rival of misogyny in a parliamentary debate now watched 2m times, she cried. "It’s so empowering to have the leader of the country call out sexism and misogyny for what it is, because often, if you talk or write about it, you are somehow made to feel like you are whingeing, complaining or overblowing things."

Just ahead of Gillard’s outburst Spicer had written of her own experience of sexism in a letter to a fictitious "Mr Sexist": "When you yelled across the newsroom, 'I want two inches off your hair and two inches off your arse,' suddenly a light went on. Of course! The size of my posterior is directly related to the content and credibility of the stories I'm reporting on for this network. Those wise words of yours from 1986 are still ringing in my ears: "That's why you don't see blonde newsreaders," you explained patiently. "People don't take them seriously."

Spicer's "letter" went viral on the internet when it appeared a week after Gillard's outburst, gathering almost 7,000 likes, but few of her female colleagues were prepared to publicly endorse it. "They were worried about being perceived badly by their bosses," says the Sky News presenter. "Women in the media implicitly self-censor because they worry about how they are going to be perceived in a male-dominated industry."
A recent survey of female journalists by Melbourne's Monash University, to be published later this year, concluded that most Australian newsrooms remain hegemonic, "blokey" environments. In the days that followed Gillard's speech excoriating the Conservative opposition leader, Tony Abbott, for describing abortion as "the easy way out" and for urging voters to "ditch the witch" among other things, much of the mainstream media characterised her performance as a political disaster. Others accused her of playing the "gender card". Yet many women used social media to express their support.

Julie Posetti, an assistant professor at the University of Canberra whose work includes the reporting of diversity, says social media is providing a useful meeting point for women. "There has been a real sense of safety in numbers, which I've felt myself."

The same survey found that 57% of those surveyed had experienced some form of sexual harassment in the past five years (compared with 20% of women generally in Australia). Of those, 87% said they had chosen not to report it. "Respondents saw no benefits in doing so, feared victimisation, or thought they could best handle the situation themselves," wrote the report's author, Dr Louise North.

Outside the media industry, a similar picture exists, according to Sara Charlesworth, an associate professor at the University of South Australia whose research focuses on workplace discrimination.

"A lot of women in senior positions often have to deny they are the victim of sex discrimination because they think it will undermine their perception as a legitimate leader," she says. "They don't want to be seen to be complaining about what has
happened to them. If you speak to senior women again and again they'll say they have to be twice as good as a man to succeed and have a thick skin. Some women say this is dreadful and others say it's just the way it is.”

For women who lodge formal complaints about sexual harassment, there can be serious consequences. A 2009 report which analysed formal complaints of sexual harassment lodged with the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity commissions, showed that over half the complainants had left their job prior to lodging the complaint, adding that sexual harassment has "significant job-related and consequent financial implications for those experiencing it". Nearly 90% of alleged harassers were men and, in two-thirds of cases, the reported perpetrator was senior to the victim.

While Australian women have some of the highest levels of education in the world and represent 50% of middle management in companies, they still only represent around 10% of senior management. Australia also has a relatively low female workforce participation rate, ranked 14th out of 34 OECD countries in 2010.

The gender pay gap remains at 17%, virtually the same as it was 20 years ago. So is there any reason to be optimistic about the future?

Spicer says that in some respects, things are a little better for her now, largely because her (male) boss is prepared to let her fit her shifts around her family.

But over two decades in the industry, she says she has only had one female boss (which lasted just two years). "The excuse that was given to me all those years ago when I was just out of university was: 'Oh well, we don't have enough experienced women in the industry.'

"You can't use that excuse any more. There are loads of experienced women my age and 10 or 20 years older who simply don't get a guernsey [get picked]," she says.

And for women who appear on screen, the complaints are similar to those raised by Miriam O'Reilly and others in the UK. You only last as long as you're young and beautiful.

"There are still plenty of men who are allowed to be there in their later years but you could count the older women on Australian TV on your fingers and all of them have got to look 20 years younger than they really are." It is perhaps these complaints that have given impetus and support to the prime minister's outburst.