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Sexist attitudes in Australia are on the rise, young women tell gender study

Women aged from 14 to 25 say they will avoid certain careers because of sexism and less than 1% want to be in politics

Female students check their exam results. Young women have told an Australian study they reject certain career paths to avoid facing sexism. Photograph: Alamy

Australia trivialises and sexualises women in senior and leadership positions, a gender and media academic has said, as a new study reports that young women are rejecting certain career paths because of an overwhelming perception they will face sexism.

Fewer than 1% wanted a job in politics and almost half said sexist attitudes in Australia were increasing, according to the survey of 1,000 girls and women aged between 14 and 25 by children’s rights organisation Plan International Australia.

More than three quarters of those surveyed had endured sexist comments, the survey published on Wednesday said. More than 30% believed it would be easier to achieve their ideal career role if they were male.
Louise North, a senior research fellow in gender and media at Deakin University, said “given the sexism and conservative values in many facets of society”, the results were not surprising.

“TV shows that focus on marrying a man and by assumption being nothing without one. A former prime minister [Julia Gillard] being asked on The Project about her sexual relationship with her partner – we just don’t take women leaders seriously in this country,” she said. “We trivialise them and sexualise them.

“So if you were a young woman in Australia, why would you consider a career in politics, for example, when you’ve just seen the way our first female prime minister was treated by the media and by the opposition?”

In June Gillard said during an interview with US broadcaster NPR that female world leaders were often judged on appearances and were not treated with the same respect as men.

“I think for men, that conversation starts with: what kind of leader will he be,” Gillard said. “You know, strong, weak, compassionate, strident. I think for women it starts with: can she lead? And it’s a subtle but significant difference.”

North said people still viewed female leaders as an anomaly. “If the government was serious about women and leadership it would have more than just one female minister,” North said.

“If business was serious about women it would have more a paltry 18% of women on ASX 200 boards.

“The ‘we select on merit’ line is very old and very tired because it basically says that women do not have enough merit, and that is just not true.”

Ian Wishart, the chief executive of Plan International Australia, said it was the first time his company had examined the experience of Australian women and he was surprised by the findings.

“I was actually shocked and very disappointed to think that 49% of women and girls are not choosing a career direction because they perceive sexist bias or sexist discrimination in that area,” Wishart said. “That’s just unacceptable.”

One of the women who helped consult on the survey told him that when she went to a university open day, a career adviser deterred her from pursuing marine biology because “it wasn’t really a career suitable for women”.

Another told him how her first memory of sexism was when a stranger asked her; “How much for an hour?” when she was 12.
He said almost 60% of the schoolgirls surveyed doubted putting themselves forward as a leader in the classroom because of the sexist attitudes they would face.

“Many girls said you immediately get called ‘bossy’ or ‘pushy’ when you’re simply trying to be assertive and step up,” he said.

Elizabeth Broderick, Australia’s sex discrimination commissioner, is working with the military, mining and construction industries to try and eradicate a culture of everyday sexism.

Gender equality principles were being also being built into the national curriculum, she said.

“I believe early education is key,” Broderick said. “I think we also need decent men to step up and create change within their own organisations.

“They need to speak out when someone says sexist remarks and remind other men that that’s not part of the way we treat each other.”