

## SYSTEMIC SEXISM

### Introduction

Despite decades of work, some government backing, and a significant boost to the work in Australia on the back of the #metoo movement, Australian media organisations, advertising agencies, newsroom bosses and screen giants have had little success in overcoming the powerful societal attitudes that replicate, reinforce and feed gender inequality in Australia, including within the media industry itself. Systemic sexism in Australia continues to require support for structural change that incorporates nuanced understandings of gender-based issues, ameliorated sexism and sexual harassment policies in the workplace, and equality of gender representation, particularly in senior roles.

The Australian Government has claimed some success in the media sector. In its [2019 national review report](#) on Australia's implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the government specifically pointed to improvements in the past five years, both in the portrayal of women in the media, and the participation of women in the media and the information and communication technology (ICT) sectors. Specifically, it claimed:

- support for the media industry to develop voluntary codes of conduct
- promotion of the participation and leadership of women in the media
- measures to enhance access, affordability and use of ICTs for women and girls (e.g., free Wi-Fi hubs, community technology centres, etc.)
- introduction of regulations to advance equal pay, retention and career advancement of women within the media and ICT fields
- provision of support to women's media networks and organisations.

A number of Australian organisations – [Women in Media Australia](#), the [Australian Press Council](#), the [Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance](#), [Women in Film and Television](#), [Screen Australia's Gender Matters](#), the [Australian Computer Society](#), [NOW Australia](#), [Our Watch](#) and [Gender Equity Victoria](#), among others – have been working to support gender issues in Australia. However, the country clearly has significant systemic, socio-cultural and financial barriers to gender equity including:

- an under-representation of women in the news media, on screen and within ICT, particularly at senior levels
- the highest level of [workplace sexual harassment](#) in all industries in Australia (81% of employees in media, information and telecommunications over the last five years)
- a lesser [quality of representation](#) of women in the media (not prime time, less use as sources of news, fewer lead stories)
- an entrenched, systemic and widespread [gender pay gap](#), particularly in newspapers
- [precarious work, with women](#) more highly represented in part-time and/or freelance work
- women in the media being [silenced as the result of abuse](#) received online
- [sexualised portrayals](#) of, and comments directed at, women, particularly sportswomen
- work environments that are not family-friendly.

# Evidence

## 1. Freedom of Expression (which includes safety of women journalists offline and online)

Freedom of expression remains a significant gender issue in Australia. Women in Australia talk about being silenced as a result of online and offline abuse. For example, the former prime minister, Julia Gillard, famously stated that there was a special type of [misogyny](#) directed by some people at women in Australia. An [Amnesty International poll](#) in Australia found that three in 10 women (30%) surveyed said that they had experienced online abuse or harassment. This includes nearly half (47%) of respondents aged 18-24. Significantly, 37% of women who had experienced online abuse or harassment said that – on at least one occasion – these online experiences made them feel that their physical safety was threatened.

The [Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance's 2018-19 Annual Report](#) acknowledges that the understanding of and prevention of online violence towards women are key issues for Australian media workers. The abuse journalists receive online is almost always gendered, in the sense that it takes forms rarely encountered by men: sexual harassment, image-based abuse, slut-shaming, doxxing, rape and death threats (acknowledging that some men do experience threats, particularly when publicly supporting women).

Australian women journalists – and particularly women who are 'diverse' in any way – report cases of trolling and stalking that have spilled into real life, putting them at further risk in a society where violence against women is already a significant problem (in Australia, on average, at least [one woman a week is being murdered by a current or former partner](#)). Indeed, in 2018, 71 women died this way.

Although trolling and stalking are [workplace health and safety issues](#), Australian employers do not always protect their staff – or freelance operatives – from harassment online, particularly in comment sections on websites or on Twitter, Facebook and other social media that have become an extension of the workplace. It is also important to note that journalists working online put themselves into an international environment, giving added poignancy to Amnesty's [#ToxicTwitter](#) report, which found every 30 seconds a woman journalist is harassed online. Women journalists, therefore, face an unacceptably toxic work environment that would not be tolerated in other industries.

An interesting irony is that many Australian predator trolls/perpetrators also suggest they are simply using "free speech" while their actions result in restricted freedom/liberties for those women they target. This claim is also used by male journalists, commentators and columnists who have been given media space to promulgate anti-women ideas that feed further online abuse of female journalists:

"I can't imagine a newspaper that publishes slur pieces against a politician's dead mother would be quite as receptive to it or understanding of what is generally accepted as inappropriate/unacceptable, if that makes sense." ([Don't Read The Comments](#), p7).

Australian academic Emma Jane talks about trolling of women as a type of [economic vandalism](#) that often costs people their jobs/careers and, therefore, impacts on the victim's freedom of expression. For women who work as freelance journalists, this is even more harmful because they rely on platforms such as Twitter for their "profile" and, in turn, further offers of work. There is increasing attention and research about the need of employers and bystanders to support women journalists who are being abused, with increasing pressure on employers and freelance commissioners to support initiatives such as moderator training for those overseeing public comments on news websites, and pushing for appropriate *regulation* for big social media. Another issue is the ongoing reputational damage done by slanderous social media remarks:

Reputational harm caused by defamatory statements online is also a concern for women journalists as, if misinformation spread by trolls is believed, it can have serious ramifications on their trustworthiness as perceived by sources, employers and colleagues. ([Don't Read the Comments](#), p11)

## 2. Gender Media Policy (which includes laws, regulatory frameworks, policies)

There is a range of national and state laws, regulatory frameworks and policies that support gender diversity in Australia. However, the stark fact remains that the 2018 Australian Human Rights Commission Report, [Everyone's Business](#), showed the media, information and telecommunications industries have the highest level of workplace sexual harassment of all industries (81% of employees in the previous five years reported being harassed). Women in media further described feeling they had to put up with sexual harassment and other examples of workplace abuse as “part of the job”, particularly if there was not a supportive management or a workplace culture that promoted gender equity.

Policies and procedures to support and protect women will only work when they exist within a culture that is, overall, supportive of gender equality that can be seen in equal representation of women in leadership, on boards as well as in equality of pay and so on. Even where there are policies within Australian organisations, they are not always well publicised internally. The [Mates Over Merit: Women in the Media Report](#) found that only 16% of 1,000 female journalists surveyed were aware that their workplace had existing policies to address online abuse, with another 32 per cent stating that their employer had no such policies.

Pay equity remains a significant issue in Australia's media industry. Analysis by the Australian government's Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) has acknowledged an entrenched gender pay gap for those in the media, information and telecommunications industries. The agency also notes senior management categories in these industries are heavily male-dominated, even within female-dominated workplaces. In the [Mates Over Merit Report](#), only 2% of women surveyed said there was equal pay for equal work in their organisations. The vast majority – 81% of respondents – acknowledged the gender pay gap, which is 23.3% in this sector. It is not just because women more often work part time because of caring responsibilities. It is also because women are often unable to work unsociable and family unfriendly hours that attract penalty rates. As experienced senior journalist Tracey Spicer wrote:

“Women are sitting next to men, in the same job, at the same level, and being paid significantly less. Several senior female managers are paid less than their male subordinates.” ([Spicer](#), 2018)

There have been some improvements in the conditions for women, with several media organisations forming new industrial agreements that include paid superannuation on parental leave, paid domestic violence leave, plus unpaid parental leave counting towards service. The industrial body for media workers in Australia – the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance – reports that issues such as family violence leave, gender pay gap audits, etc., still create much friction with some organisations (i.e., these organisations are often hesitant to implement or take them seriously).

Representation in senior and creative roles remains problematic. The State Government of New South Wales – in its [Women's Strategy 2019-2022](#) – is working to change under-representation in some senior and key creative roles in the screen, media and entertainment industries. Create NSW is leading a number of initiatives to improve this, including:

- supporting a 50:50 gender target by 2020 for female writers, producers and directors in screen development and funding programs in NSW
- a strategic initiative to increase women’s opportunities in the arts and culture sectors
- diversity reporting benchmarks for women in creative and executive leadership roles in the arts and culture sectors
- a strategic initiative to support career pathways for women under-represented in the arts, screen and culture fields.

The State Government of Victoria has also introduced the [Gender Equity Victoria](#) initiative, which aims to lift women’s visibility as subject matter experts, leaders and spokespeople. The national public broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, has also introduced a similar program to build its [database of women](#) across industries to call on as expert talent, opinion leaders and sources for interviews/commentary on their digital and broadcasting platforms.

In Australia, legislation does not currently regulate advertising that is sexist. Much advertising regulation in Australia is in the form of self-regulation. Industry peak bodies such as [the Australian Association of National Advertisers \(AANA\) and Advertising Standards produce codes of practice](#), by which their members are expected to voluntarily abide. The AANA is increasingly taking action in relation to breaches of the code due to sexist gender representations. However, there are limitations to its power to remove sexist advertising from the public sphere in a timely manner. Advertising Standards accepts complaints from the public and competitor businesses, providing they relate to AANA’s codes of practice, one of which concerns [discrimination or vilification based, inter alia, on gender](#). Advertising Standards is also currently running its [\\*kinder conditions](#) campaign that “highlights a number of social issues which can cause concern in advertising campaigns including sexism, racism, misguided claims and advertising to children”.

Despite these policy initiatives, it is clear there remains a major problem with systemic/structural sexism in the Australian society which is evident both in the nation’s media and in media workplaces.

### *3. Media Content (which includes representation of women in news -GMMP-, sexist stereotypes)*

Representation of women in media remains problematic, despite initiatives at both national and state government level as well as independent action by media organisations and industry bodies established to advance gender issues.

The Women’s Leadership Institute of Australia’s [2019 Women for Media Report: You Can’t Be What You Can’t See](#) found simply that women were missing from the media. Although women make up 50.7% of the Australian population, the authors of this report found that, in the media, women were not seen as experts nor as sources:

“We are missing from news stories and from feature stories, we are missing from photos both as photographers and as subjects; and we are missing in that very influential place in the Australian media landscape, our voices are missing from opinion pieces and columns.” ([You Can’t be What You Can’t See](#), p2)

One way that women can be included in the media is to be part of panels that speak at public events. The Women’s Leadership Institute of Australia is promoting [the Panel Pledge](#) which has had hundreds of Australian organisations sign up to address the underrepresentation, or absence, of women at public forums.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation has also followed the lead of the BBC in introducing the 50/50 challenge, with specific requirements for newsrooms, such as to approach women as experts before contacting male experts and to keep a record of who is approached and for what reason. Gaven Morris, the ABC's Head of News, said:

“The statistics were pretty shocking to us: we were way out of proportion on the gender balance issue. We had a real wake-up call because, although we have had gender diversity front of mind, we still weren't doing very well with it.” ([You Can't Be What You Can't See](#), p36)

If they are in the media, women are usually portrayed poorly. An interesting snapshot analysis of [Australian sportswomen](#) by children and girls rights agency Plan International in 2019 found women face a tirade of sexist and belittling comments. These negatively impact on girls and young women in the broader community who see the abuse. Its analysis of social media commentary found that more than a quarter of all comments were sexist, sexualised, belittled women's sports or were otherwise negative in nature. The Victorian Health Department has also done work examining the media portrayal of women in sport, specifically looking not only at the quantity of representation but also the quality (e.g., who success is credited to – the athlete or a male coach, partner, etc. – as well as the kinds of adjectives used to describe women in sport versus those describing men, sexual objectification, and so on).

In reporting against the Beijing guidelines, the Australian Government pointed to the success of the [Stop it at the Start Campaign](#) advertising campaign, which challenged influencers of young people to think about the impact of what they say and do when having conversations about respect with young people. The government also promoted the Our Watch Awards, an annual event that recognises excellence in journalism that contributes to a deeper understanding of issues around violence against women and their children. It also supported Our Watch's *National Media Engagement Project*, which aimed to improve media reporting of violence against women and their children and to raise awareness of the impacts of gender stereotyping and inequality. This project included media capacity training for future and practising journalists as well as producing a national toolkit for engaging the media in the prevention of violence against women.

Another national initiative has been the [Gender Matters](#) program, which Screen Australia aims to ensure titles that receive production funding have a creative team (writer, producer, director or protagonist) that is at least 50% women by 2018-19. Screen Australia released the second instalment of tracking against this aim on 15 August 2019. It showed that 51% of all projects were receiving production funding on a three-year average and having at least half of the key creative roles occupied by women. The program also includes career development initiatives designed to support women to increase their participation in film and television productions.

The Queensland Government also produced a guide for media professionals to encourage the creation and use of non-stereotypical, balanced and diverse images of women and girls in the media. It also released the [Domestic and Family Violence Media Guide](#) in 2018. This guide aims to help journalists and editors report on issues of domestic and family violence without sensationalising the topic or causing further trauma to victims and their families.

Like other parts of the media, advertising plays a powerful cultural role in shaping gender norms and relations in Australia. Advertising has historically under-represented girls and women or portrayed them in stereotypical and sexually objectified ways. Stereotyped representations of men in advertising are also evident, although not as prevalent. Such portrayals do not accurately reflect the diversity of Australian communities and undermine efforts to promote gender equality. Importantly, research has established that sexist advertising has harmful social and health impacts, especially for women (McKenzie et al, 2018).

Recent Australian research has found that gendered portrayals are now so pervasive that they have fostered a desensitising effect, making community members less likely to react to or complain about them (Gurrieri, McKenzie and Bugden, 2019). Interventions to prevent or address sexist advertising may occur through several distinct mechanisms: legislative frameworks; self-regulatory and co-regulatory systems; the provision of educational resources to the broader community; industry initiatives to re-shape advertising culture and promote diverse, inclusive and ethical practice; and the exertion of influence on advertisers and regulators through consumer activism (Gurrieri and Hoffman, 2019). Key to addressing and preventing sexist advertising is a whole-of-system approach with mutually reinforcing interventions that capitalise on different opportunities for influence (Gurrieri and Hoffman, 2019).

However, community members expect industry to take responsibility for improving gender portrayals. Further, they believe governments should play a more prominent role in mitigating harmful impacts and enforcing regulation (Gurrieri, McKenzie and Bugden, 2019). To address barriers to gender equitable representation in advertising practice, a recent Australian educational initiative at RMIT University has been developed to foster gender transformative creative practice for undergraduate advertising students.

Despite all these initiatives, gender portrayal concerns are identified in about half of all complaints made to Advertising Standards, Australia's self-regulatory body that works with television and radio broadcasters, newspaper publishers and online publishers to achieve compliance.

#### *4. ICT Content (which includes cyber-violence against women, sexist hate speech, #MeToo and other social media movements)*

As mentioned above, Australian women working in media are subject to actual and threatened gendered violence, particularly online. Women are more often than not freelance or casual journalists, rather than permanent newsroom staff, because of the culture of newsroom media work (lots of overtime, insufficient recognition of caring responsibilities and flexibility with hours and so on). Australian women are more likely to take on parenting and caring responsibilities, including of elderly or disabled relatives. Australian women who write about gender inequality are also more likely to be freelance journalists and, because of the subject matter, more likely to be targeted for abuse. Women increasingly find themselves working in freelance roles, without institutional support, often alone in their own home, with unstable incomes, grappling with the gig economy, etc. There are many reasons these women need greater protection and there needs to be a recognition of the gendered nature of insecure, unstable and "gig economy" work.

This uncertainty of employment sees women journalists even more vulnerable to the effects and impacts of online hate speech and threats of violence because they have no workplace protection in place, apart from their industrial union. Any defamatory comments made about them online, either by trolls or other journalists, further risks their ongoing employment. As one freelance journalist pointed out in Gender Equity Victoria's report, *Don't read the comments: Enhancing online safety for women working in the media*.

"It's a very precarious existence not helped by the fact that, when we get death threats, we are reading them in our own homes often with no one around, let alone colleagues or bosses." ([Don't Read The Comments](#), p13)

#### *5. Women in Indigenous and Community Media (which includes women's access, attacks against them)*

The Australian Government boasts that, under its [Indigenous Advancement Strategy](#), it supports the Indigenous broadcasting, media and communications sector which provides a platform for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. Many of the Indigenous media organisations funded under the IAS have

Indigenous women producing content and broadcasting, and often their content focus on issues and events effecting women as well as opportunities for empowerment.

The IAS also provides support to this sector to cover issues that reflect community interests and support cultural expression and maintenance, often in Indigenous language.

There is no evidence to suggest that women in Indigenous communities or community media have any better conditions than women in mainstream media. There is evidence in the Indigenous and community media sector that women of diversity, particularly ethnic or sexual diversity, are attacked more often and with more venom online. In this sector, women are often relegated to producer roles (supporting male presenters) or asked to work (or volunteer) for free for the purposes of “exposure” and “CV building”.

#### *6. Gender and Media and ICT Conglomeration (which includes women's access and participation in media and ICT industries, labour rights, etc.)*

A report by Deloitte Access Economics for the Australian Computer Society (2015) found that there was a lack of women working in ICT and that this was a significant problem Australia needs to address, “not only for reasons of equality but also because the economic payoff will be significant if we can more fully utilise our human capital” ([Deloitte Access Economics](#), 2015, p.2).

#### *7. Gender in Media and ICT Education (which includes gender in the curricula of Journalism and Communication schools, in media and information literacy, etc.)*

Gender studies are not mandated in Australian media or ICT courses. Most students receive limited exposure to gender-informed materials or curriculum, even since the development of the new international syllabi [Gender, Media and ICTs: New approaches for research, education & training](#)—which was prepared for the UNESCO series on Journalism Education by the [UNESCO UniTWIN Network on Gender, Media and ICTs](#).

Academics play a key role in preparing the next generation for industry and are, therefore, positioned to be role models for current and future attitudes around stereotypes. As Australian journalism academic Louise North (2010) noted in her [examination of journalism curricula in Australia](#), many journalism educators “are not aware of, interested in, or informed about gender issues in relation to journalism production and media content. Nor do they have a good understanding of the breadth, history and importance of the scholarship” (p. 112). She further noted that “journalism educators teach what they know and what they are most comfortable with – politically and culturally” (p. 104).

Therefore, academics – particularly those who have come to teaching directly from industry – also find that they themselves require training on the prevalence and impact of bias before they can instruct students on these issues.

This is significant because – unless Australia academics are informed of the statistics and can see the dominant cultural ideology about stereotypes within their own country’s institutions and in the media – they cannot fully address such issues with their students. Here, ideology is seen as “representation whereby the prevailing ideology of a culture dominates. The media and ICTs are not neutral but can be major instruments of ideological domination” (French et al., 2019, p. 53).

One Australian university has begun to address the lack of ethical gender training in its undergraduate Bachelor of Communication (Advertising) degree. In 2019, a research pilot titled ‘Addressing Sexist Advertising Practice: A Pedagogical Pilot’ began at RMIT University. This project aims to explore how gender transformative creative practice can be developed as a form of advertising education. The project will develop gender transformative advertising curriculum, track and analyse student learning of this in the classroom and map the development and creation of gender transformative advertising practice more

broadly. Importantly, the strong links with industry mean this will produce skills transferable to the advertising industry, in time fostering industry and social change.

#### *8. Gender and Digital Rights (which includes universal access to ICTs, women and girls in STEM, gender and Artificial Intelligence, Big Data, etc.)*

A report by Australia's CSIRO on [Artificial Intelligence](#) (Dawson et al 2019, p.55) found that there was a gender imbalance in AI-technical workforces and that there was also a gender pay gap, with women receiving 27.3% less pay than men for the same work. The risk this report flags is that the lack of diversity, including gender diversity, of AI designers and developers results directly in the lack of diversity in the AI products being produced (Dawson et al 2019, p.55). A lack of diversity is likely to result in perpetuation of societal biases and the domination of world views by the mostly male designers and developers. The Australian Government has responded with plans to underpin the development of a deeper STEM talent pool and has supported the Australian Academy of Science's development of the [Women in STEM Decadal Plan](#), a roadmap to sustain increased female participation in STEM over the coming decade (Dawson et al 2019, p.55).

#### *9. Access to Information*

Women have less access to information because they generally have less access to the internet, internet technology and internet data allowance. This is also generational. The [Australian Digital Inclusion Index](#) report found "Older Australian women have lower levels of overall digital inclusion than their male counterparts, and record lower scores on all three sub-indices. The digital inclusion gap between older women and men is widest for the group aged 75–79". (p.15)

[The Digital News Report: Australia 2019](#) also found there were differences in news consumption patterns among genders and generations in Australia. The data revealed that Australian women were less interested in news than men and less likely to be heavy news consumers. Women were also more incidental news consumers. While men were more likely to access news directly by going straight to a brand website or app, women were more likely to access news indirectly, reading it via social media.

One of the most significant findings of the Digital News Report in 2019 was that Australian women were more likely to avoid news and feel worn out by it. The data showed that 67% of female news consumers had tried to avoid news, compared to 58% of men. At the same time, 32% of female news consumers reported feeling worn out by news, compared to 25% of men. The data also revealed a gender 'paying' gap, with 17% of men paying for online news compared to 10% of women doing likewise, which the researchers suggested was because men tended to be more interested in news and accessed it more often.

# Recommendations

In view of the above evidence, specific and implementable actions that should be taken by governments/media and ICT industries include:

1. Mandated reporting of gender targets in the news media, advertising, on screen and within ICTs, consistent with international standards
2. Further initiatives around representation of women in both creative and leadership positions in the media and ICTs
3. Formal reporting of salaries by gender by media organisations
4. Recognition, by industry and governments, of the harmful social and health impacts of sexist media representations, particularly in advertising
5. Better support for women working in the media to increase their profiles
6. Support for more representation of women in the media
7. Further promotion of progressive gender portrayals and the adoption of ethical positions in all media
8. Legal and financial support for women working in the gig economy
9. Action against those in who direct sexualised comments at women, particularly sportswomen
10. Educational offerings in universities and schools that create an understanding of gender inequality in media and society
11. Legislation to restrict sexist advertising
12. Action and support for those making complaints of sexual harassment in the workplace.

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