

➤ **WOMEN'S BUSINESS**
Supporting female startups

➤ **STRONG FOUNDATION**
Resistance training for teens

➤ **CURTAINS FOR CARERS**
Gendered obstacles in the film industry

FUTURE-MAKERS

A FORMULA FOR SUCCESS

STEMming the loss of
female students



WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY

Special Issue
on Gender
Equality

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ABOUT THIS MAGAZINE

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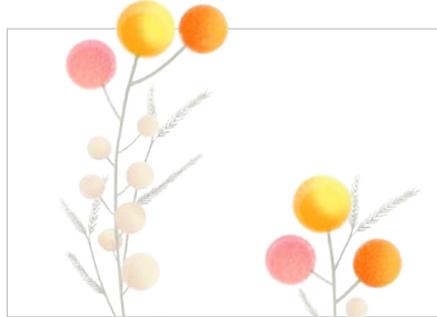
ABOUT

Western Sydney University is a large,
student-centred, research-led university.
Established in 1989, the University proudly
traces its history to 1891 through the
Hawkesbury Agricultural College. Today the
University has more than 200,000 alumni,
45,000 students and 3,300 staff.

The University is now ranked in all
major global university ranking systems,
and is in the top 2% of universities world-
wide. Through investment in its academic
strengths and facilities, the University
continues to build its profile as a research
leader in Australia and is nurturing
the next generation of researchers. Western
Sydney University graduates go on to
take up rewarding careers that make real
contributions to societal change, lifting the
pride of students, staff and the community.

westernsydney.edu.au

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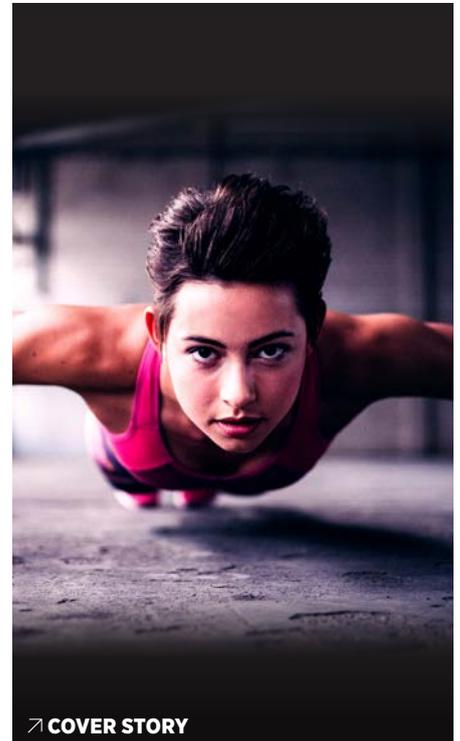
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Cover image: © Monty Rakusen/DigitalVision/Getty

THE FIGHT FOR EQUALITY

Welcome to our special digital edition of *Future-Makers* which focuses on Gender Equality research undertaken at Western Sydney University.

A 2022 United Nations progress report shows that based on the latest data on the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the world is currently not on track to achieve gender equality (SDG 5) by 2030. Reassuringly, researchers worldwide are continuing to work to rectify this situation. Some of those working hardest are Western Sydney University’s own academics, whose efforts have contributed to the University achieving a global ranking of first in the world for progress on Gender Equality (SDG 5) in the 2023 *Times Higher Education University Impact Rankings*. Also, for the second year in a row, the University has been placed first overall in these prestigious annual rankings — a first for an Australian university.

Gender equality is not simply the subject of research at Western — it is a philosophy we put into practice. This year, the University appointed its first female Chancellor, Professor Jennifer Westacott AO. This achievement comes alongside the University exceeding the NSW and

national averages for the proportion of staff at senior lecturer level or above being women.

In this special issue of *Future-Makers*, we focus on research from Western that addresses SDG 5. Here, you will find stories about the delivery of gender and sexuality diverse education, and the empowerment of young women — from recognising and overcoming societal obstacles to addressing issues of sexual harassment, female genital mutilation, and sexual discrimination.

The stories span from the western Sydney region to Dhaka in Bangladesh and cover a broad range of professions. In them, the impact our researchers have made on women’s lives — at both a local and a global level — is clear.

We hope you enjoy this issue and encourage you to connect and collaborate with our researchers. ♥

Professor Barney Glover AO
Vice-Chancellor and President

Professor Deborah Sweeney
Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Vice-President (Research, Enterprise and International)



The UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a blueprint towards a better, more sustainable future (see: sustainabledevelopment.un.org). Western Sydney University has many research projects aligned with these goals. This issue of *Future Makers* focuses on Western’s research towards SDG 5.



Times Higher Education
Impact Rankings
SDG5 GENDER EQUALITY
2023 TOP 10

STRIDING TOWARDS EQUITY

Western Sydney University takes equal pay and equal representation seriously — it has been cited as an employer of choice for gender equality for more than 20 years by the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA).

The University has regularly conducted internal pay audits since 2009, and between 2021 and 2022 saw a 1.2% fall in the average gender pay gap to a difference of 11.4%. In comparison, the WGEA reported that the average national gender pay gap actually increased by 0.3% over the same period to 14.1%.²

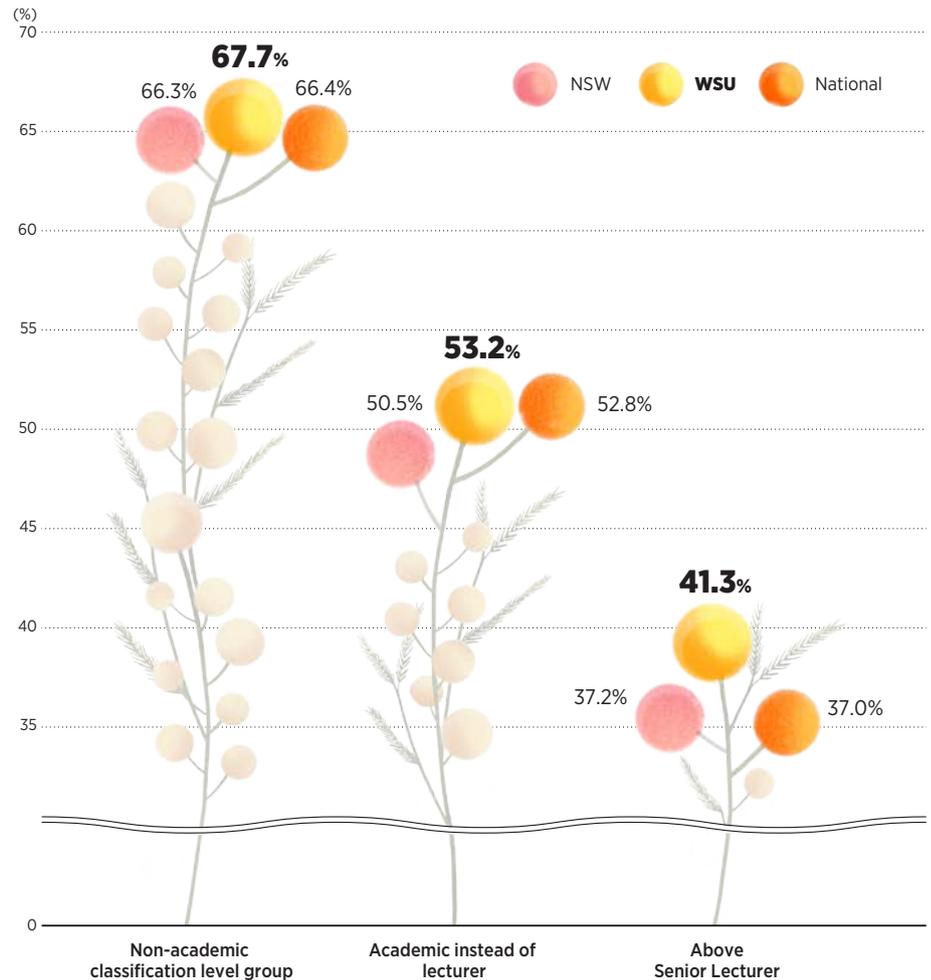
Western has also exceeded targets for women in key leadership positions (see ‘Women in management’), including appointing its first female chancellor, Professor Jennifer Westacott AO, in 2023.

The University was ranked first in the world for Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 Gender Equality in the 2023 Times Higher Education (THE) University Impact Rankings.

“Our goal is to promote and embed a gender-aware and gender-responsive culture that understands gender equality as a core value,” says Professor Barney Glover, Vice-Chancellor and University President.

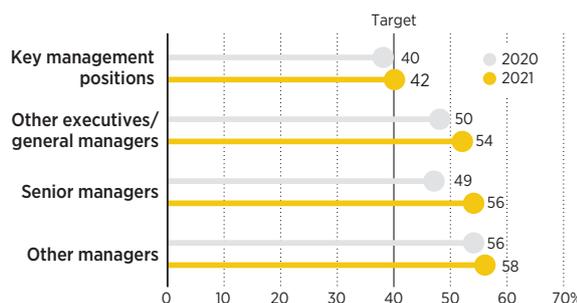
HOW DOES WESTERN COMPARE?

In 2021, according to figures from the Department of Education, Western exceeded both national and state averages for the amount of women in senior academic positions.¹



WOMEN IN MANAGEMENT

Western exceeded its internal target of 40% women in managerial positions in both 2020 and 2021.²



THE TEAM AT THE TOP

As of early 2023, one third of the University’s executive are female.³



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1. www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/resources/staff-pivot-table

2. westernsydney.edu.au/equity-and-diversity/equality/gender_pay_equality/workforce_profile_and_pay_equality_analysis

3. www.westernsydney.edu.au/about_uws/leadership/executive

A STRONG FOUNDATION FOR LIFE

Sarah Kennedy is on a mission to strengthen bodies and minds by incorporating resistance training into school physical education curricula.

Sarah Kennedy's passion for lifting weights began when she was a 15-year-old squash player, and ultimately motivated her to study exercise science for her undergraduate degree. Two years into her university studies, family circumstances caused her to drop out for a few months. By the time she returned, she was required to do a third-year

placement, and the only spot still available was in her university's research centre for physical activity and nutrition in schools. Though it wasn't an area she was familiar with, that placement would have a lasting impact on her future career.

"The moment I stepped into a school and saw the little kids, I decided I wanted to be a teacher," she says. She eventually worked as a primary and high school teacher. Now, with two masters' degrees in teaching and exercise science and one PhD later, Kennedy is a lecturer in sport, health and physical education at Western Sydney University. She is also at the centre of what is likely the world's first large-scale school-based strength training programme.

This 'Resistance Training for Teens' programme builds on two research projects called 'Nutrition and Enjoyable Activity for Teen Girls' (NEAT Girls) and 'Active Teen Leaders Avoiding Screen-time' (ATLAS). Both

NEED TO KNOW

- Resistance training can help promote healthy minds and bodies.
- There are many misconceptions about resistance training.
- The Resistance Training for Teens programme busted these myths and provided appropriate strength building exercises for youths.



© wundervisuals/E+/Getty



Girls may avoid strength training because they are worried about 'bulking up'.

these projects included elements of resistance training and were led by Professor David Lubans at the University of Newcastle's Priority Research Centre for Physical Activity and Nutrition, in New South Wales.

In 2015, when funding for a larger and more focused research programme on resistance training was awarded, Lubans contacted Kennedy, who had worked with him while doing her master's degrees. Given the focus of the project, Kennedy was perfectly suited to the PhD, so in 2016 she got started.

SIGNIFICANT BENEFITS

Resistance Training for Teens ran until 2019, reaching around 10,000 secondary school students across New South Wales. PE teachers

were trained to deliver the program and given access to an app and detailed exercise cue cards that allowed them to tailor training programmes according to a student's abilities and the resources already available.

The programme had great success, significantly improving students' muscular fitness, resistance training skill competency, and resistance training self-efficacy.

“RESISTANCE TRAINING IS A LOT SAFER THAN MANY POPULAR SPORTS.”

“One of the best things I saw during an observation at a school was seeing a young man get down and do three push-ups,” says Kennedy. “His teacher said she had never seen him so impressed with himself. She said before the programme was implemented at his school, he was reluctant to participate in the physical education classes and was unable to lift his own body weight.”

“It's a way to engage the students who need it the most in schools, as it is a form of activity they may not have been exposed to before, to give them that knowledge that they will hopefully take and apply into adulthood,” she explains.

Kennedy wants to see resistance training become

a part of all students' skill sets, and says schools should provide opportunities for young people to participate in a wide range of activities to provide what they need to become lifelong movers. “Some kids will be skilled netball or basketball players, some are going to be dancers and gymnasts, and others are going to be good at resistance training,” she explains. “Resistance training is an additional thing that needs to be provided at schools to show kids there is something they might be good at.” Kennedy adds that resistance training has “profound” injury-prevention benefits, as it helps students strengthen their muscles, ligaments, bones and later helps prevent osteoporosis.

© Edwin Tan/E+/Getty

Strength training can improve bone health.



PUMMELLING MISPERCEPTIONS

Kennedy is proud of the impact the programme has had in changing the perceptions of young girls about the importance of moving their bodies for staying strong and healthy. “One of the greatest things is going into schools and having girls ask, ‘Oh, Miss, do you lift weights?’” They are often surprised when she explains she has been doing it since being a teenager, as the belief often is that girls don’t engage in that kind of exercise. “I’ll tell them, it’s good for our bones, which is important as women are more at-risk of osteoporosis than men. Do you want to be frail when you’re older? Or do you still want to be moving around and living your best life?” And they’re like, “Yes!”

Many misconceptions and myths surround the idea of resistance training, especially for young people. Kennedy explains that people sometimes think resistance training stunts growth, because they see that weightlifters are sometimes short. But the reality is that shorter people are often better at lifting weights because they have relatively

greater muscle mass, and don’t have to lift the weights as far. We don’t look at basketball players and think that it was what made them tall, she says.

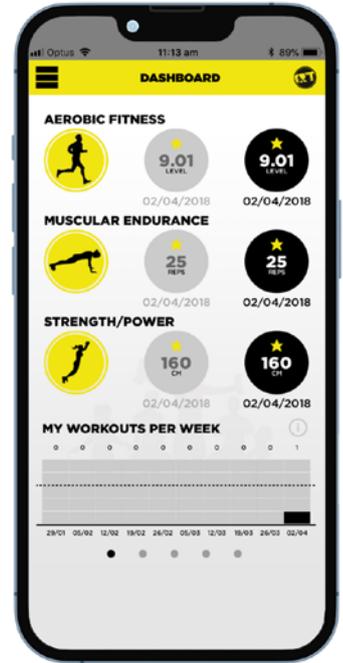
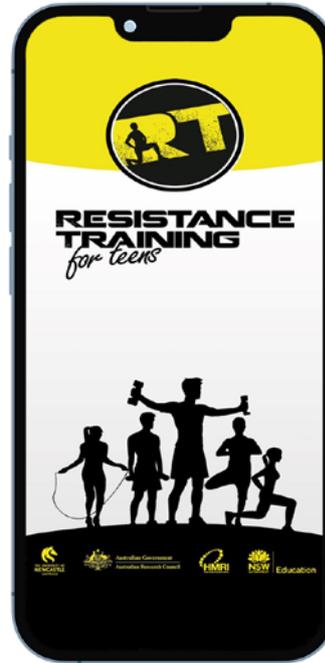
“Resistance training is also a lot safer for young people than many other popular sports,” Kennedy adds.

She thinks social media has a lot to answer for, with many posted images creating a perception of the sport that can intimidate people, discouraging them from going to the gym.

But childhood and adolescence are the ages at which we are best placed to learn physical movements, she says. We learn to walk and run at an early age, so these movements are natural. Giving young people the knowledge and skills to engage with resistance training when they are young will help them incorporate those movement patterns that will benefit the rest of their lives.

SCALING UP

The researchers are now planning to expand the Resistance Training for Teens Programme. Partnering with the



Teachers also had access to a smartphone app, as seen here, that demonstrated how to conduct different workouts and facilitated fitness testing.

NSW Department of Education and NSW Health, Kennedy will again be working with Lubans to scale the project up to include a further 90 schools.

The international team of about 15 researchers involved in the programme have already provided training to NSW Health project officers, who will

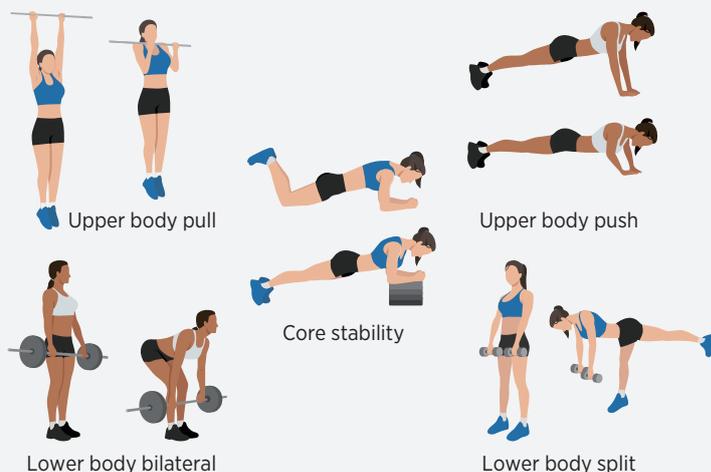
support the schools. During this next phase, teachers will receive training and resources to deliver the programme, and a selection of schools will receive additional support from project officers and equipment packs. Researchers will then investigate the impacts of these varying levels of support.

The findings from the programme’s initial phase are now being incorporated into updated activity guidelines for resistance training in Australian schools.

“I’m hoping that as we continue to educate teachers and students, we will move away from that focus on weightlifting, powerlifting and bodybuilding that everyone thinks resistance training is,” says Kennedy. “It is so much more than that. It’s the thing that is going to help your grandma not fall later in life. It’s what is going to help you feel stronger. It is going to help your mind.”

RESISTANCE TRAINING SKILLS

Resistance training skills that were taught included upper and lower body exercises that could be performed using only a student’s body weight, resistance bands, free weights, or barbells, depending on an individual’s abilities and school resources.



(top - mobile phone frame) © Jasmin Merdan/Moment/Getty; (bottom) © Iloputra/iStock/Getty

EMERGING VOICES FOR THE PLANET

How young people are re-energising democracy with their fight for climate justice.

Given the increasing effects of climate change, growing numbers of young people are engaging in politics to call for urgent action. Inspired by the Swedish activist, Greta Thunberg, who began a ‘School Strike for Climate’ protest outside her country’s parliament at the age of 15, hundreds of thousands of school students have joined strikes and climate action around Australia.

A team, led out of Western Sydney University, are researching the actions and implications of Australian young people in the climate movement.

“Children and young people

are excluded or ignored in Australian politics. They can’t vote, yet when they take action and voice their concerns they’re regularly dismissed by politicians, the media and other adult leaders. But actually, they have been organising and campaigning for action on climate change for a long time now,” says lead chief investigator and Young and Resilient Research Centre co-director, Professor Philippa Collin.

“As a society we have a lot to gain from better understanding how students are organising, communicating and taking action for climate justice”.

YOUNG VOICES IN DEMOCRACY

“Children and young people are an untapped resource for Australian democracy,” says Collin, who has spent 15 years studying youth political participation.

“In longitudinal research we find that they are knowledgeable and passionate about many topics and are doing a wide range of work to make a better society.”

The significance of this is not lost on others. “Young people get talked down to a lot, because of ageism. But they are very switched on, strategic and are doing incredible work to help make a better future for everyone,” says Dr Jenna Condie, who co-leads the Blue Mountains chapter of the Australian Parents for Climate Action (AP4CA) and collaborates with youth organisations through her transdisciplinary



Some creative signs at youth protests against climate change inaction in Australia.

curriculum work at Western.

Young people are organising and attending strikes and protests, creating strategic communication, engaging with politicians, taking legal action and building alliances with other groups and networks. It is mainly young women leading these movements — something the project team aims to understand and explain.

Researchers from Western’s Young and Resilient Research Centre have joined forces with the Australian National University, the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) and the University of Sydney to glean what can be learned from the movement to address climate change and strengthen democracy.

Building on foundational work from 2019 - 2022, the three-year, ARC-funded project will use digital ethnography, surveys, in-depth interviews, and visual analysis to explain how young people express their political commitments.

“We would like to create an evidence base of their actions, which demonstrates how these actions can support broader social, cultural and political outcomes,” says Western’s Dr Michelle Catanzaro, who will be focusing on the visual and creative aspects of the research.

A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH

The multi-disciplinary research team are using a participatory approach to work with young people. “We are not doing research ‘on’ young people, we are researching with young people,” explains Catanzaro. The project has been shaped by students and the team will work with student interns and a student collaborator group as well as employ young people as peer researchers to advise, generate data, analyse and communicate the research.

“As a young person, this research is important as it raises questions about youth activism and Australian democracy that

NEED TO KNOW

- Australia’s young people are finding creative and strategic ways to call for urgent climate action.
- A team of researchers are collaborating with young people to understand, support and explain the implications of their activism.
- The research will help governments, educators and community listen to young people and recognise that they can meaningfully contribute to the climate and democratic crises in Australia.



have not been discussed or researched. Young people are taking action for climate change, which will disproportionately affect us,” says Anhaar Karim, 15, who has been working with the team. “We see governments dismiss both young people and our concerns. This research will open doors to understanding the insights of young people and what we contribute to politics, leadership and the democracy of Australia.”

STRONGER DEMOCRACY

To honour young people’s calls to be heard, the team will co-create actionable insights that can have immediate impact. They have already published several articles and used preliminary findings to contribute to podcasts and a Parliamentary submission to lower the voting age to 16. The submission was led by one of the project’s chief investigators, Professor Judith Bessant, from RMIT.

Bessant argues that ageism has contributed to the dismissal of young voices in politics. “There is a modern, western, historically unique idea of ‘the child’ or ‘the adolescent’, whereby young people are infantilised and considered not to have political capacity. However, research shows that young people at 16 do have the cognitive capacity to make political judgements. At 16 in Australia, you are allowed to work, pay tax, enlist in the military and drive a car. You should also be able to vote.”

There needs to be an understanding that young people comprehend what is going on in the world and that their messages have equal value to those of adults, Bessant says. “They can introduce new understandings and practices to help us mitigate the intersecting climate and democratic crises.”

Many of the project’s outputs will be centred around supporting and amplifying the voices of young people. This includes creating an

online gallery of visual language used at protests, infographics of survey findings and visualisations of media analysis. “This will be a living archive of youth climate action that young people and their organisations can use, add to, and shape,” says Catanzaro.

SPEAKING TO POWER

As an offshoot of the project, Western, the Powerhouse Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences in Ultimo, Sydney, and student voices from multiple universities have collaborated to showcase the youth debates and messages commonly seen on the streets of the climate strikes. “We are interested in the nexus between protest, art and design and the role visual communication plays in delivering impactful messages”, says Catanzaro “this event will explore how formal institutions, such as museums and universities, can support and amplify the voices of young people outside of a protest environment”.

The team has faced politicisation of the research when an initial recommendation to fund the research in 2021 was blocked by the Coalition government. The decision was viewed by many as inappropriate political intervention, impeding academic freedom.

This did not deter the team, who are parents, aunts, uncles and grandparents. Catanzaro, who has two young children, says that “although I’ve always been environmentally conscious, becoming a parent really increased the urgency of climate action for me”.

The team argue that while young people are doing vital work, climate justice requires community-wide action. “Everyone has a responsibility to recognise the existential threat that we all face and do something,” says Bessant. Collin adds: “Children and young people in their millions are telling us we must do more now.”

Sexual harassment and discrimination contribute to women leaving the legal profession.



SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN LAW

According to research, sexual harassment has been rife in the legal profession for decades, but a Western Sydney University study has found it's often very hard to prove.

In June 2020,

an independent investigation found that a former judge sexually harassed at least six junior associates during the decade he worked at the High Court of Australia.

In a statement issued after the investigation, Chief Justice of the High Court, Susan Kiefel, said that the findings were of “extreme concern” and that she and her staff were “ashamed this could have happened at the High Court of Australia”.

Disturbingly, this is not an isolated incident, with research suggesting that sexual harassment is rife across all levels of the legal profession and has been for some time.

A 2019 International Bar Association survey of nearly 7,000 lawyers from 135 countries found that about 47% of Australian female respondents said they had been sexually harassed at work, compared to 37% globally. Another 2019 survey of nearly 250 people conducted by the Women Lawyers Association of NSW (WLANSW) found that more than 70% of female lawyers had experienced some form of sexual harassment, including

NEED TO KNOW

- Sexual harassment is common across all levels of the legal profession.
- Western’s Ashlee Gore conducted interviews with women about their experiences working or studying in the legal system.

unwelcome touching, advances, and objectification in the workplace or at social events.

The survey also found that women were not reporting these incidents due to fears about how it could affect their careers.

Although there has been much discussion about how women have been treated in the legal profession over the past 30 years, not enough progress has been made to fully address sexual harassment, says Dr Ashlee Gore, a criminologist who specialises in gender and violence at Western Sydney University’s School of Social Sciences.

“It’s becoming increasingly obvious that very little has changed,” says Gore. “The law is something people turn to in order to fix some of these problems, but yet, it is itself complicit in a lot of these practices.”

UNRAVELLING NUANCES

After studying law herself and speaking with friends who had left the legal profession due to sexual harassment, Gore wanted to better understand how these incidents affect women’s experience as they embark on a career in the field, or decide to leave it.

In 2021, Gore sat down with 10 women aged from 19 to 33 to have a conversation about what first motivated them to study law, their experiences working in the legal industry, and how they defined and understood sexual harassment. The participants ranged from students to working lawyers who had left the profession due to sexual harassment. Only one woman, a solicitor in the financial sector, was currently working in the field.



Sexual harassment is a problem even in Australia’s High Court.

“THEY’RE
ALREADY BEING
SOCIALISED
TO SAY ‘THIS IS
NOT A BIG DEAL,
GET OVER IT.’”

While Australia’s legal definition of sexual harassment focusses on unambiguous advances, such as unwanted touching, requests for sex, and sexually explicit emails or texts, Gore’s research participants said they experienced subtler, everyday intrusions that could easily be brushed off as “normal”.

This suggested that sexual harassment in the profession is often more ambiguous than its legal definition, says Gore.

“There was this constant pervading sense that something wasn’t right in the way they were being treated,” she says. “But it wasn’t overt enough in

their minds to justify making a complaint, and it set up this culture of being normal.”

One participant, who has since left the field, said that she felt undermined, as her boss’s behaviour didn’t quite fit the legal definition of sexual harassment and her colleagues turned a blind eye to his behaviour. For instance, the boss dictated a strict dress code for female employees, such as wearing skirts, high heels, and blouses. If they came to work in pants and flat shoes, she said he would fly into a rage. The boss also called his female staff his “harem”.

The law firm’s toxic and misogynistic culture made Gore’s interviewee feel traumatised, and it wasn’t until after she left the legal profession to work in the domestic violence sector that she realised what she had experienced: coercive control.

“She had this constant anxiety in her stomach about going to work,” says Gore. “But she struggled to pinpoint an incident

where she could say, ‘well that’s sexual harassment, I could report him for that.’”

In other cases, race shaped how young women were sexually targeted by their colleagues. One participant talked about a network of male barristers who focussed their attention on young female lawyers of Asian heritage. She told Gore that the group often reached out to Asian women to “mentor” them, but that their motivations were often far more sinister. “They were basically looking to pressure these young women into sex,” says Gore.

Such experiences weren’t restricted to the workplace. One law student told Gore that a male student had touched her during class and sent her inappropriate text messages. “It was making her really uncomfortable and disrupted her learning,” says Gore.



**MORE THAN
70%
OF FEMALE
LAWYERS**
reported
being sexually
harassed in a 2019
WLANSW survey

When the woman approached her university counsellor to get advice on what she could do about the situation, she was told that filing a complaint against her perpetrator — who was an international student — could

jeopardise his visa. The woman left the counsellor’s office feeling responsible for the person who was making her uncomfortable.

Her experience offered a snapshot of how sexual harassment in the legal profession often becomes normalised before lawyers are even working on their first case, says Gore. “They’re already being unintentionally socialised to say, ‘well this is not a big deal, get over it,’” she says.

It’s a sentiment that lasts long after graduation, leading to a pervasive ‘sink or swim’ culture, says Gore. For some of her interviewees, experiencing sexual harassment made them wonder if they simply weren’t cut out for the profession, or that they just needed to tough it out.

One young ex-lawyer told Gore that an older female colleague gave her the advice that she had to learn to be the

bigger voice in the room. This is concerning, as it sends the message that women are the problem because they don’t have a thick enough skin, says Gore.

SPEAKING UP

Once she has finished analysing her results, Gore hopes to publish her study in the Australian Feminist Law Journal and present her findings at academic and industry conferences. She says the project highlights the need to broaden the conversation about sexual harassment and develop a more comprehensive definition.

Fay Calderone, an employment lawyer and chair of diversity, inclusion and wellbeing at Sydney law firm Hall & Wilcox, says that Gore’s research demonstrates the importance of focussing on low-grade behaviours and everyday interactions when building workplaces that are free of sexual harassment and safe for everyone.

“In order to manage our risk and stop serious instances of bullying and sexual harassment in the workplace, we must pull up the small stuff first,” says Calderone, who is also a board member of Full Stop Australia. For that to happen, legal workplaces should take complaints seriously, ensure that no one is victimised for speaking up, and encourage ethical bystanders to speak up when they witness inappropriate behaviour, she says.

“If we are ever going to achieve gender equality in our profession, it is critical that we examine these risks and barriers to reporting closely and take proactive and deliberate steps to address them every day,” says Calderone. ♥



A proactive approach to fight sexual harassment in the legal profession is needed if gender equality is to be achieved.

© Maskot/Maskot/Getty; (infographic) © Rudzhan Nagiev/istock/Getty

BEYOND MUTILATION

Efforts are progressing to educate the public and clinicians about female genital mutilation/cutting. Olayide Ogunsiji's research has contributed to estimates that roughly 53,000 girls and women are living with the consequences in Australia today.

“FGM/C HAS
MULTIFACETED
IMPACTS ON
A WOMAN'S LIFE.”

Olayide Ogunsiji is an associate professor at Western's School of Nursing and Midwifery.

Fatu Sillah will never forget what happened to her when she was six years old.

Her mother’s friend came to their house near Freetown in Sierra Leone and invited her to a party next door. Excited by the thought of food and friends, Sillah quickly headed over, but her anticipation soon turned to alarm.

“There were young girls sitting in a line crying and I could sense straight away what was going on,” recalls the 32-year-old, who now lives in Sydney. “But it was too late for me to escape.”

Sillah is one of an estimated 53,000 women and girls in Australia who suffered female genital mutilation, also known as female genital cutting, or FGM/C, and one of 200 million women and girls globally. The World Health Organization defines FGM/C as “all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia, or other injury to female genital organs for non-medical reasons.”

Even estimating the number of survivors in Australia was a challenge involving careful collation of reliable international prevalence figures and analysis of ongoing immigration from countries where FGM/C takes place. Indeed, it was not until the release of a 2017 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report that an official number was available in Australia.

The report, co-edited by Olayide Ogunsiji, an associate professor at Western’s School of Nursing and Midwifery, has enabled a better understanding of the effects on Australian communities and helps drive funding for concerted efforts to help survivors in the community and in hospital settings.



Olayide Ogunsiji (standing) works with spokesperson Fatu Sillah to increase the resources available to those living with the impacts of female genital mutilation/cutting in Australia.

THE SPECIALISED HEALTH IMPACTS

Healthcare services equipped to provide survivors with the help they need are important, explains Ogunsiji.

Aside from the cruelty of genital mutilation, survivors often struggle with lifelong complications. “FGM/C has multifaceted impacts on a woman’s life — physically, emotionally, psychologically, and socially,” explains Ogunsiji, who is also a registered nurse.

Short-term impacts include pain, bleeding,

swelling in the genital area, and urinary tract infections. In the long term, survivors may face menstrual problems, sexual health and childbirth complications, and mental health issues.

Yet Ogunsiji’s research has shown practitioners’ knowledge in this area is severely lacking. As a result, she is now working with women’s health clinics and organisations to raise awareness of the issue with pamphlets and training resources among a select group of midwives to provide

specialised care to survivors. In addition, she is exploring how to make awareness of the dangers of FGM/C part of the school curriculum.

“We need to work in partnership with the community, healthcare providers, and the government to get the job done,” she says. Earning the trust of immigrant communities where the culture of cutting is prevalent is also key, says Ogunsiji. “The aim is to connect them with services to support them, rather than to judge or attack them.”

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A LACK OF AWARENESS HAMPERS SUPPORT

The motivations behind FGM/C are complex and involve a mix of social and cultural factors, such as the belief that it preserves a woman's modesty or helps prepare her for marriage. In Sillah's case, she and all her friends were cut because "mutilated girls were thought to be more humble, less promiscuous, or dirty," she says.

Today, FGM/C is practiced in South-East Asia, the Middle East and more than 30 countries in Africa. But there are survivors worldwide. Awareness of the issue in Australia, however, is low. "When I speak about FGM/C, it's jaw-dropping for many people," says Sillah. "They say, 'Wow, I didn't know this happened to people who live in Australia or that it happened to women in general.'"

For example, in a 2019 study of almost 20 Sydney-based primary healthcare providers (GPs, nurses, social workers, etc.), Ogunsiji and her team found while most respondents were aware that FGM/C is illegal in Australia, none knew the actual penalties (in NSW, those who perform FGM/C are subject to up to 21 years imprisonment). Many were also unsure of how to engage those affected who might need legal or crisis-care support, with some saying they had only watched a 15-minute documentary on the topic during their training, without the chance to ask questions.

"The key to tackling FGM/C prevention — and to help meet the United Nations' goal of stamping out the practice by 2030 — is to do more than just criminalise the act," Ogunsiji says. Education and awareness must come into play too.

To help raise awareness, Ogunsiji has developed an educational programme about providing care for women and girls who suffered FGM/C and has delivered it to approximately 17,000 people, including students and clinicians in the Australian Medical Student Association and the Australian Primary Healthcare Nurses Association.

In addition, for the past two years she has led a virtual event to commemorate the annual International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting which is held every 6th of February. The 2023 event attracted more than 61 individuals and organisations drawn from all Australian states and territories, and the United States of America.

OPENING UP TO OTHERS

Ogunsiji first began researching FGM/C more than 15 years ago, as a young PhD student at Western Sydney University. Before starting her research, she, too, was unaware of the problem. In Nigeria, where she grew up, they had "been taught



**AN ESTIMATED
200
MILLION**

women and girls
live with FGM/C

it was no longer acceptable to circumcise girls," says Ogunsiji.

"But then I came to Australia, and it caught my attention as an important issue that impacts women and girls, and it needs to be known about," she says.

For the first six months after she was mutilated, Sillah could barely walk. "Urinating was painful for me," she recalls. She still suffers from long, painful periods with heavy bleeding, and nerve damage that causes her to sweat a lot, even in freezing temperatures. "It kind of screwed up my whole body system," she says.

She also has to deal with talking about her past to potential sexual partners. "I answer questions truthfully so that they understand," says Sillah. "But at the same time, it's always a debate: 'Should I? Shouldn't I? Am I just wasting all my time and energy telling you when two months later, you don't want to be in my life?'"

"The short-term and long-term trauma of FGM/C is always going to be there," she says.

In early 2020, Sillah joined forces with Ogunsiji to help raise awareness of the issue. "I share my story not because I want you to feel sad for me, but because I want you to learn about FGM/C," says Sillah. ♥

HELPING THE VOICELESS SPEAK

➤ In addition to her work with healthcare providers, Ogunsiji is heading up a pilot study in western Sydney that uses body mapping, an art-based methodology, to explore what living with FGM/C is like for women and girls in a new country. "Living with FGM/C actually goes beyond the mutilated genitalia for survivors; they get trapped in a strange body without a voice in their new countries," says Ogunsiji.

➤ Ogunsiji and her research partners, who are located in almost all the states and territories in Australia, are applying for ARC funding to expand the study to the national level. The team are planning to use an intersectional approach — including language, access to healthcare, and power dynamics — to explore both the long-term effects and the everyday meaning of living with FGM/C, and to develop health policy and practice recommendations.



NEED TO KNOW

- In Australia, there are an estimated 53,000 female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) survivors.
- The United Nations hopes to eradicate the practice by 2030.
- Education about support systems for healthcare providers and survivors is key.

EARLY DETECTION OF TERROR

By analysing online interactions, research has revealed how to identify individuals at risk of becoming violent offenders.

A report by Western's Associate Professor Lucy Nicholas and colleagues at Swinburne University of Technology has found that a significant overlap exists between a subset of anti-feminist men and right-wing terrorists in Victoria. This finding suggests that government agencies may be able to identify emerging threats before it is too late.

The report, *Mapping right-wing extremism in Victoria* examined interactions that took place in online forums and social media, and conducted stakeholder surveys to investigate whether men who expressed anti-feminist sentiment, who believe that feminism has gone too far, are more likely to turn into right-wing extremists.

“What we were interested in was how men develop the sentiments that have been seen to underpin violence,” explains Nicholas, whose primary research area at Western's School of Social Sciences is gender and sexuality.

The links in language and

NEED TO KNOW

- There is overlap in the sentiments of anti-feminist men and right-wing extremists.
- Anti-feminist groups could be considered terrorist organisations.
- Better support for men could prevent violence.

sentiment were plain to see. “What we can say from the data is that men who are aggrieved about custody, for example, develop a coherent ideology that it is feminism's fault, and then link that to other progressive phenomena. They then develop a broad and extremely angry discourse, and link to a community of like-minded men online.”

Their work has developed a list of red flag language that can be used to identify individuals whose views risk taking them down a violent path. Referring to recent crimes by anti-feminists in the USA, Nicholas says: “There needs to be attention to a rise in those discourses before it gets to the point of a mass shooting.”

The work formed the basis of a submission to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security Inquiry Into Extremist Movements and Radicalism In Australia. The team recommended both bottom-up approaches, such as providing

an alternative community and information to men at risk of radicalisation, as well as a top-down securitisation approach, including listing some anti-feminist groups as terrorist organisations.

The report suggested that violence against women needs to be considered a security issue and a threat to public order, in the same way that Muslims at risk of radicalisation have been targeted by intelligence agencies.

Claudia Fletcher, works for ‘No to Violence’, a male-focussed family violence referral service. She says the language highlighted by the report was “instantly recognisable through my own counselling experience.” She says the report highlights the importance of linking disparate government groups towards the goal of better supporting at-risk men. “If combined with appropriate referral pathways, the service system could interrupt men at risk of radicalisation during trigger points and direct them toward safe social networks,” she says. ■

A far right protest in Melbourne, 2019.



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CURTAINS FOR CARERS

Gendered obstacles in the screen industry can hinder careers.

A national survey of more than 600 people working in the Australian film and television industry found that workers' experiences of parenting and caring were highly gendered, with 74% of carers — 86% of whom were women — in the study reporting that caring responsibilities have a negative impact on their career.

“Most contemporary experiences in Australian workplaces around caring responsibilities, including taking time off and then returning to paid work, are gendered — but this industry has particular challenges that exacerbate this pattern,” says Sheree Gregory, a lecturer in human resources at Western Sydney University's School of Business.

Gregory was part of the survey team — supported by Create NSW, the state government's arts policy and funding body which brings together arts, screen and culture functions in an integrated entity. She has researched work practices in the entertainment sector since 2013 and has interviewed a wide range of stakeholders; including actors working across theatre, television and film; union representatives; female screen directors working in Australia, the US, and UK; and cultural policy advocates in the US. Gregory says that the non-standard work hours, precarious employment opportunities and frequent travel requirements in musical theatre, screen, and associated work in Australia are challenging for people with caring responsibilities.

NEED TO KNOW

- Working in the screen industry is difficult for carers.
- The effect is often highly gendered.
- Western research has led to industry recommendations to address this.

“Standard childcare hours that run from 7am to 6pm don't work when your show opens at 8pm, or if you're going to be on the road for weeks on end,” she explains. As a result, many workers rely on extended family or others to help with childcare. “This is care that is informal, it's unstructured and it's invisible,” Gregory adds.

More than half of the national survey respondents (56%) worked as freelancers or were self-employed, so had no organisational parental leave entitlements or guaranteed return-to-work provisions, and many women said they concealed their caring responsibilities from employers to avoid discrimination.

One female executive told the researchers, “In various jobs I have been extremely careful to not mention my child, virtually pretending not to have a child.”

Gregory points out that keeping the existence of children invisible exacerbates the problem, devaluing caring in the screen industry and limiting opportunities to discuss more flexible workplaces.

Most survey respondents (81%) were female, and the top five roles for women were producer, crew member (post-production), director, writer, and on-set crew member.

The survey also found a significant discrepancy in pre-tax earnings between men and women, with 55% of female carers earning below the Australian median income, compared to only 34% of male carers.

The survey results were detailed in a full report called ‘Honey, I Hid the Kids!: Experiences of Parents and Carers in the Australian Screen Industry’ launched in South Australia, Victoria, and NSW in 2018, which led to five industry recommendations to advance gender equality and address the impact of caring on screen workers.

These included measures to help carers return to work (including subsidised on-site childcare, flexible and more predictable work hours, and hiring incentives for employers), training

Non-standard work hours can make screen industry careers difficult for carers.

for industry and for carers, and introducing care-sensitive funding agency processes.

The report was triggered by a screen industry roundtable discussion about the issues facing the workforce, which included carers, together with various industry responses.

One solution, for example, is a production finance funding specification by Create NSW that requires projects receiving over \$400,000 funding to engage at least one crew member, key creative, or department head who is a carer, and provided a database of eligible workers, with the South Australian Film Corporation introducing a similar scheme.

Other programmes include a workshop and mentoring scheme for screen practitioners who are carers in regional NSW and returning to work after a career break, called ‘Making it Possible.’

“It has been good to see that the industry initiatives prompted by the report, because prior to the survey, working conditions for carers in the Australian screen industry had not progressed much in the past 30 years,” says Gregory. ■



INCLUSIVE CURRICULA BACKED BY PARENTS

A major survey reveals widespread support for the recognition of sexuality and gender diversity in the classroom.

In recent years, debate about the inclusion of gender and sexuality diversity has been frequently featured in the media. Many mainstream media outlets reported that most parents didn't want their children taught about sexuality and gender diversity in the classroom. But results from research by Western Sydney University academics reveal this to be a major misperception.

"Previously, studies had indicated that parents overwhelmingly feel there should be some education around these issues in schools," says Associate Professor Tania Ferfolja, from the Centre for Educational Research in the University's School of Education. She explains, however, that those studies — including some she carried out with her colleague, Associate Professor Jacqueline Ullman — were small and limited.

To address this, Ferfolja and Ullman embarked on the country's largest and most detailed exploration of sexuality and gender diversity education, to clarify exactly what parents would like to see their children taught in schools and when.

PARENTAL SUPPORT

Funded by the Australian Research Council, the team conducted a nationwide survey of 2,093 parents, whose children attended public school in Australia from

kindergarten through to the final year of high school. Participants were recruited through Facebook and Instagram ads as well as paid market research panels. The online survey responses were weighted to ensure the estimates were nationally representative.

The responses indicated that 82% of parents supported the inclusion of gender and sexuality diversity-inclusive relationships and sexual health education topics in the curricula at some point between kindergarten and year 12. The majority believed that this information should be introduced to students by the

NEED TO KNOW

- Western researchers conducted a nationwide parental survey on education about sexuality and gender diversity in schools.
- 82% of parents were in favour of such an inclusion in the curriculum.
- Parents supported inclusion of sexuality and gender diversity education, to facilitate the creation of more equitable environments, support student wellbeing, and counter histories of oppression.

end of Years 7 and 8. "I think that this topic has been set up in many ways, including by the media, as being controversial, taboo, a no-go zone — so even amongst ourselves we were surprised by how high that figure of support was," says Ullman.

The team probed a bit deeper into why parents were in support and found that there was a sense that including such information would promote equity in education, counter histories of oppression and support the wellbeing of all kids — not just those who identified as gender and sexuality diverse.

"There was also the feeling that it would bring us up to speed with where our society is at right now," adds Ullman.

TALKING TO PARENTS

Research shows that young sexuality diverse, transgender, and gender diverse people are extremely vulnerable to mental health concerns resulting from unwelcoming or unsupportive environments, including schools. Their rate of depression and anxiety is considerably higher than for adolescents in the general population and they experience extraordinarily high levels of self-harm and suicide attempts.

"Part of the reason we wanted to do this work is that from existing research we are aware that a number of gender diverse or same-sex attracted students have quite a hard time, for a variety of reasons, but primarily to do with their experiences at school," Ullman confirms.

So, for the second phase of the research, the team contacted a subset of parents from the survey whose children are gender and sexuality diverse. They also ran an online forum for this cohort and

conducted in-depth individual interviews with these parents to ask about their experiences of navigating the school system for their children.

Interviewees and forum participants described the discrimination and abuse their children faced from other kids in all sorts of places including school hallways, bathrooms, and on the way home from school. "There was one parent who actually had to sell their house to try and get their child relocated to another school, where they thought they would be safe," says Ferfolja.

Parents also found they had to spend a significant amount of time navigating the school system and sometimes provided schools with resources to educate principals and teachers about the correct language to use to avoid misgendering their children. They also described how some schools, in trying to support gender and sexuality diverse children, were instead further isolating them.

"The parents that came and spoke to us were hugely generous, they were amazing advocates for their child, but not every child has that kind of advocate," says Ullman. "For those kids, school really is the primary source of access to an adult who's going to care for them and make them feel like it's a safe space." This reinforces the importance of teachers understanding gender and sexuality diverse students and their families and being equipped to actively support their wellbeing.

"If a young person is not comfortable in a classroom, they're not going to learn," says Ferfolja. "They can't engage if they're worrying about other issues that are of more immediate concern to them or their families."

Studies have shown parents believe there should be curricula related to sexuality and gender in the classroom.



EMPOWERING TEACHERS

The third major component of the research project by Ferfolja and Ullman is the development of a “performed ethnography”. This involved collating the voices of research participants from phase 2 and creating a play for the purposes of instruction and education.

From this verbatim theatre piece, the team developed a short film featuring parents’ stories and a suite of associated professional learning resources that can be used to help schools and teachers engage in professional development around these topics.

The resources, which are now freely available online, will help teachers better navigate what is, for many of them, a potential minefield. “Teachers are very uncertain about what they can actually say in the classroom — such as what might or might not get them into ‘trouble,’” Ferfolja

says. “They’re under a lot of pressure, but that’s all the more reason to give them support around these kinds of issues.”

“If some teachers feel less fearful or maybe more empowered after engaging with this material, hopefully it will translate into practical action in schools because teachers will have more of an understanding about the experiences of these young people and their families,” adds Ullman.

WIDER IMPACT

Now that Ferfolja and Ullman have published journal articles detailing their findings, they are working on further disseminating their work in the academic, public, and policy spheres.

In 2021, the pair were invited to present their findings to the New South Wales Legislative Council, providing expert witness testimony opposing proposed amendments to the

Education Act 1990, known more widely as the Parental Rights Bill (2020). The proposed amendment would have made teachers’ classroom discussions about sexuality and gender diversity punishable, leading to the potential removal of teachers’ formal teaching accreditation. The proposed legislation was later rejected by the NSW Parliament.

The researchers are planning to make further recommendations for practice and policy to help guide and streamline curriculum development, possibly nationwide. “We will be working with an advisory committee to feed results back into every state and territory,” Ullman says.

One of the major stakeholders in the advisory committee has been the Australian Council of State School Organisations. Chief executive Dianne Giblin says the main reason for the Council’s

keen interest and support is to ensure that school curricula are able to properly represent and reflect diversity across the Australian community.

“Not only do we need to give a window into sexuality and gender issues for all young people but particularly for young people who are gender diverse,” she says. “The diversity of sexuality in our community needs to be mirrored in our curriculum, so all young people have that broader perspective.”

There’s also a need to support “the mental health and wellbeing of our young people who may be transgender or same sex attracted. That needs to be reflected so that they feel comfortable about who they are,” Giblin adds.

Ferfolja agrees: “It’s been used as a political hotcake for such a long time; it’s time to stop that and to just get on with it and support these kids.” ♥

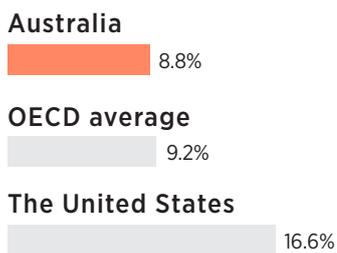
THE FACTORS BEHIND FEMALE ENTREPRENEURIAL SUCCESS

A new project could expand Australia’s innovative talent pool by highlighting obstacles and tools encountered by diverse female entrepreneurs on the path to funding, creating and growing new businesses.

“Entrepreneurship is typically framed as a male domain,” says Dr Sheree Gregory from Western Sydney University’s School of Business. In a bid to change this, and improve the entrepreneurship ecosystem in western Sydney, she is leading a team exploring factors that may encourage diverse female entrepreneurs, such as access to sponsors, mentorship and investment funding.

“Governments and communities put a lot of effort into thinking of how to attract and retain entrepreneurs and innovators,” says Gregory, a human resources and management lecturer. “But they

NEW BUSINESSES RUN BY WOMEN



need to pay more attention to attracting and retaining an untapped pool of highly educated women with ideas and energy to create new business.”

A 2020 Statista survey of female entrepreneurs put Australia’s proportion of new businesses run by women as low as 8.8% — which falls short of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) average of 9.2%, and is well below the 16.6% seen in the United States.

Such low rates of women’s participation in new ventures in Australia, points to the need for targeted initiatives to support and encourage female innovators, argues Gregory, whose research interests include women’s working lives, gender equality and diversity, inclusion and innovation.

She suggests that solutions could be adopted from a number of city, state and other governments around the world that have developed initiatives to support more diversity and inclusion among entrepreneurs, such as support mechanisms at universities, access to quality child care and innovative models of care, and the fostering of inclusive innovative business ecosystems.

STRUCTURING THE PROJECT

Gregory and her team first conducted in-depth interviews

NEED TO KNOW

- The number of female entrepreneurs in Australia falls short of the OECD average.
- There is a need for targeted initiatives to address this.
- Western’s Sheree Gregory is investigating the challenges faced by female entrepreneurs in Australia.

with six female entrepreneurs. “We asked them to comment on key issues and challenges in the entrepreneurial ecosystem and the impact on women in Australia,” she says.

“These interviews formed a scoping document that generated strong ideas around gender equality networks, career milestones, life events, advocates, sponsors and caring responsibilities,” she adds.

The interviews identified a range of constraints, including struggles accessing investment sources. As a result, “most women start businesses in an informal way, with their own funding or through family support,” Gregory says.

In some cases, starting a family was the impetus for

(Infographic) © Rudzhan Nagiev/Stock/Getty. © d3sign/Moment/Getty

entrepreneurship, because women felt that they could create a better alternative to the lack of support they experienced as an employee in the corporate environment. Many women report having faced challenges such as metaphorical ‘glass ceilings’, gender pay gaps and the so-called ‘carer or motherhood penalty’.

“I GOT A LOT OF PUSHBACK FROM MY MALE COUNTERPARTS IN THE INDUSTRY.”

One interviewee, after she fell pregnant, felt as though her manager no longer recognised her value to the organisation. “My boss saw me as a risk, rather than seeing...my dedication and my ability to...give back to the business,” she said. She didn’t want to seek out employment under similar circumstances and decided to build her own practice.

Another factor that emerged from the interviewees was the lack of opportunities for meaningful support networks and mentorship, Gregory adds, with some respondents receiving critical comments from male peers.

One interviewee reported that she was challenged on the business model she had decided upon. “I got a lot of pushback from my male counterparts in the industry,” who quizzed her on why she was setting

up as a company rather than a sole trader.

The approach women take to structuring their businesses can be influenced by ambitions around how the company might support their family in the future. “Women’s decisions about their business ventures and enterprise and working time are greatly influenced by gendered beliefs and expectations,” Gregory says, adding that “gender is an integral part of this study.” An intersectional lens is urgently needed, to shine a light on the care economy and entrepreneurial ecosystem in western Sydney.

SOLUTIONS NOT PROBLEMS

The research has already provided many useful insights, with some results presented to the NSW Government in 2022.

“Governments talk about attracting business with infrastructure and buildings, and ‘liveable city’ initiatives such as public transport hubs,” Gregory says. But if we want to attract entrepreneurs and innovation — and childcare isn’t factored in as part of the equation — then these initiatives are catering more towards the needs of male entrepreneurs, who are less likely to be primary caregivers.

The next phase of the research begins in early 2023 and involves a large survey, informed by the qualitative study, to extend across Sydney’s west.

“Western Sydney offers a lot of opportunity, a diverse population, and a wide range of small and family businesses,” says Gregory, which makes it an ideal location for studying the obstacles to inclusion faced by diverse female entrepreneurs. ♥

Current government initiatives cater more to the needs of male entrepreneurs.

“THEY DO NOT
ATTEMPT TO
EMPOWER WOMEN
— THEY DO NOT
EVEN ASK WOMEN
WHAT THEY NEED.”



BUILDING A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Western Sydney University researchers are lifting the lid on women’s experiences of sexual harassment on public transport in Bangladesh.

Over 90% of women who use public transport in Dhaka, Bangladesh, have experienced some form of sexual harassment during their commute. Despite this alarming figure, few studies have explored women’s experiences of sexual harassment, the effectiveness of NGO initiatives, and how women are taking action. At Western’s School of Humanities and Communication Arts, Arunima Kishore Das is trying to change that.

“In Bangladesh, there are very limited spaces for women

to freely share their experiences of harassment on buses,” says Megha*, a 20-year-old commuter. “If we do, we will be stigmatised.”

By combining qualitative surveys and social media analysis, Das, an Associate Lecturer at Western, investigated women’s experiences of sexual harassment on public transport, their views on women’s rights and gender relations, and how they use social media to raise awareness.

“NGOs tend to portray women in Bangladesh as passive



Sexual harassment on public transport is a big issue in Bangladesh.



Activists protesting rape in Dhaka on October 21, 2020.

Facebook groups to raise funds for launching women-only buses in Dhaka to reduce sexual harassment cases.

Unfortunately, Das found that these social media initiatives failed to thrive in the long term, which she attributes to the lack of grassroots-level organizing or community bonds. This led to difficulty in attracting donations — making it hard to transition from social media movement to real world impact.

Das is also examining initiatives run by government organisations and NGOs to assess whether they are adequately addressing women’s issues.

“Most of the NGOs in Bangladesh are funded by Western donors with a set idea of Bangladeshi women as voiceless, oppressed and in need of rescuing,” she says. “This is why when the NGOs design sexual harassment projects they take a top-down approach that satisfies donor interests. They do not attempt to empower women – they do not even ask women what they need.”

She has found that many of these initiatives fail to consider how age, class, religion, education, and ethnicity shape women’s perceptions of sexual harassment and instead focus on providing statistics about sexual harassment.

“There is a huge gap in sexual harassment prevention projects that actually pay attention to women’s diverse narratives and serve their needs,” says Das.

On the one hand, community or social media initiatives that are

NEED TO KNOW

- Sexual harassment is rife on public transport in Bangladesh.
- NGOs, the government, and women commuters are pursuing initiatives in parallel.
- Arunima Kishore Das hopes her research will help these groups work together.

designed with women in mind, fail to attract sustainable funding, and on the other, NGO-led programmes don’t really fit the needs of the women they are trying to serve.

It’s a complex problem, but Das believes that a groundswell of collective feminist activism — with both online and offline components – might be part of a solution to help bridge the gap. “Hopefully the women who lead such initiatives would be considerate of the needs of diverse groups of women and bring them into the action,” she says. “This is why grassroots-level activism is needed, not only social-media-centred initiatives and NGO-led initiatives.”

Das plans to share her research findings with women commuters, NGOs, and government departments to help the groups work together to develop solutions that more effectively tackle sexual harassment on public transport. She also hopes her research will contribute to the development of safer public transport systems for women. ♥

**name changed for privacy*



9 OUT OF 10 WOMEN who use public transport in Dhaka, Bangladesh, have experienced some form of **SEXUAL HARASSMENT**

© NurPhoto/Contributor/NurPhoto/Getty

A CULTURE CHANGE FOR CARERS

Navigating the disability and aged-care maze for migrants.

For ageing parents who continue to be the primary carers for adult sons and daughters who have disabilities, there is a terrible and constant dread: what will happen to my child when I am too old to care for them?

For ageing parents from migrant backgrounds, this question is further complicated by a lack of culturally sensitive and responsive government funded services, systemic racism, language barriers, and at times, unhelpful attitudes towards disability within their own cultural communities. By far, most of the everyday support and care for family members with disabilities falls to women — primarily mothers.

This intersection of age, migration, ethnicity, disability, and gender has long been a focus of Professor Karen Soldatic's work

at Western Sydney University. "There is this long history of active exclusion of disability through the migration test and in turn, culturally responsive and appropriate services for first- and second-generation migrant families have only recently become a serious concern in Australian disability public policy," says Soldatic, who is herself a second-generation migrant.

As a result, living with a disability and caring for persons with disabilities within one's family can be isolating for people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) backgrounds. Most of the current aged and disability care services provided in community have not been designed with consideration of the specific needs of Australians from multicultural backgrounds. Planning for care transitions is therefore more difficult for migrants who care for family members with disabilities.

Multicultural communities in Australia have long been underserved by disability services, and reports have suggested that the new multi-billion-dollar NDIS policy has not necessarily increased access to services as it was hoped. Soldatic says that much of this failure is about some fundamental differences in understanding service practice in Australia. "A lot of that is because it's a highly individualised process of funding, so you need to lobby, and have the skills and resources to advocate for oneself?"

To address these challenges, a team of researchers at Western Sydney University, including Soldatic and Drs Daniel Doh, Lise Mogensen, Rohini Balram, and Nichole Georgeou, have partnered with the Multicultural Disability Advocacy Association (MDAA) of NSW. Together they are developing an information toolkit to help ageing primary carers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds navigate the increasingly complex world of disability and aged care funding, supports and services, and how to plan effective transitions to care for both ageing parents and adult children with disabilities.

“THERE IS A LONG HISTORY OF ACTIVE EXCLUSION OF DISABILITY.”

"It's not about determining what that path should be specifically for each family, but providing the necessary information to get people to start to plan and think about what that process might look like for them," Soldatic says. "It's about providing an information pathway that will support them to determine what they might need to put in place, and where those services are."

This is about much more than just housing. "We need to get away from the fallacy that once a person has moved out of the family home, they don't need any care from an external person to overview their care



Carers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds often face difficulties accessing support and disability care services.

and support package," Soldatic says. "It's not just functionality like shopping and things, but having a high-quality life once people have settled into their new living arrangements."

Doh describes a typical scenario for this transition: 'Jane', an elderly lady and first-generation migrant, who has been the sole carer for her disabled son for his entire life (33 years), is now starting to experience her own age-related health issues. She has no partner, and limited social connections, speaks very little English, and her other son is busy with his own life.

NEED TO KNOW

- Many primary carers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CaLD) have difficulty in accessing support and disability services.
- To address this, a team of researchers from Western are working with the MDAA to develop a toolkit for ageing carers from CaLD backgrounds.



work with these very families, especially advocates from the migrant-disability sector. Doh emphasises the importance of this ‘co-creation’ anchored in people’s lived experience, as opposed to a detached academic process.

The first part of developing this toolkit is understanding what migrant carers actually need. The team at Western are working with MDAA to survey ageing carers within CaLD communities to build an understanding of this. “We’re still thinking of the specific nature of the toolkit because we don’t want to produce something or bring out a product that is still not accessible,” Doh says.

Susan Laguna, executive director of the MDAA of NSW, says the CaLD community faces many challenges in accessing existing services to aid in the transition from disability care to aged care. “We’re talking about the language difficulty in accessing, we’re also looking at the complexity of the application process,” she explains.

“Sometimes our cohorts are prevented from accessing services because the language that the government uses for services might be difficult to understand.”

People from CaLD communities also often prefer to speak to someone in person, yet there is increasing automation in the application processes for disability and aged care.

For Soldatic, the toolkit is part of a bigger effort to change the narrative. “How do you destigmatise disability for communities where they can celebrate the diversity within their own culture and family that’s inclusive of disability?”

In Australia in 2018, there were

2.65
MILLION
CARERS



with women comprising

72%
OF PRIMARY
CARERS

Source:
Australian Bureau of Statistics

“Her ability to access resources is limited unless someone comes to explain to Jane what options are available for her,” Doh says. “She has no clue what is next for her.”

The team’s work with migrant communities in western Sydney has highlighted the need for more culturally competent and tailored services not only to meet the needs of individuals in this situation but also to empower them to ask for help. “You don’t treat culture or the way of life of people as an annex,” Doh says. “You treat it as embedded, integrated into our actions, the way we talk and think.”

This requires a rethink of how we use language and concepts in policies and services for multicultural communities.

The aim of the information toolkit being developed through research with ageing parent-carers is to help families navigate the complexity of service providers and government funding. To get this right so that it is accessible and culturally meaningful to families, the most important feature of the design is to ensure that it is grounded in the everyday experiences of ageing carers, persons with disabilities, and the professional staff who

UNDERSTANDING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Local community groups of the African Great Lakes diaspora are working with Western Sydney University researchers to help understand and foster action against domestic abuse.

When Mugabo* came to a village in Rwanda looking for a wife, 23-year-old Pascaline Isheja* was swept off her feet. Overlooking the 30-year age gap, she believed that Mugabo was rich, had a good job and promised a better life in Australia. She agreed to marry him.

Isheja's expectations, however, plummeted soon after moving to Sydney. Her new husband was a factory worker, not a doctor as he had claimed; and far from having money, he shared a flat with three others. The deception went even deeper, she discovered, when it came to light that he had a previously undisclosed former marriage and two children.

Mugabo quickly became jealous and controlling, refusing to give Isheja money, limiting her social contacts and keeping tabs on her when she went out. On the worst days, he would hit her.

But Isheja just kept her head down and carried on. "We have this culture of hiding things and saying if you're not lucky to have a good husband, that's just your destiny. You don't divorce or separate,"

says Nadine Shema, co-founder of the Great Lakes Agency for Peace and Development (GLAPD), a Sydney-based nonprofit that focusses on helping migrants and refugees from Africa to settle in Australia.

Shema is a fellow Rwandan, and was one of Isheja's first friends in Australia. She recalls a day early in their friendship when she had invited Isheja over to her house. "We spent the whole day together, but she didn't tell me anything about her life or abuse. You could see some signs though."

But things soon came to a head: Mugabo returned home from work early that evening and when he appeared at Shema's doorstep, Isheja began visibly shaking. "You could see she was so scared," recalls Shema. Nonetheless, Shema invited him in for dinner, but Mugabo was so impatient to leave that he began shouting and violently yanking his wife's hair.

Around 2015, Shema and her GLAPD colleagues began noticing a steady rise in the number of women approaching them for

help from within the diaspora community from Africa's Great Lakes region, encompassing the nations of Rwanda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya and Uganda.

NEED TO KNOW

- In Australia, one in four women experience domestic violence. But those migrating from the Great Lakes region in Africa tend to be more vulnerable to abuse.
- A study led by a team from Western identified the main contributing factors behind this trend.
- Their recommended solutions include building trust and implementing education programmes for the community and key stakeholders.

"That's when we started thinking that we should do some research to try and showcase how big the problem is," Shema says. Her team reached out to the Sexualities and Genders Research group at Western's School of Social Sciences. Dr Selda Dagistanli, a senior lecturer of criminology and policing, stepped in to lead the project.

"GLAPD approached us with the intent of getting some research done so that they could put this on the radar of support services, and perhaps get some funding to assist their communities," recalls Dagistanli.

MANY FORMS OF ABUSE

Domestic violence is a pattern of abuse where a person seeks to control or dominate another. Apart from physical assault, it can take on many forms — including verbal abuse, emotional manipulation, marital rape and withholding finances. "Some women don't understand what domestic violence is and if you ask them if they experience

Domestic violence can take on many forms of abuse, not just physical.



it, they'll say: 'Oh he doesn't hit me,'" says Shema.

The impact of domestic violence can be severe. It is linked to depression, anger and shame, often resulting in long-term emotional and psychological trauma. In Australia, domestic violence is the leading contributor to illness, disability and death in women aged 18-44.

Dagistanli and the team launched a study to determine how members of the African Great Lakes diaspora, as well as welfare professionals, viewed and responded to domestic violence. "One key question was how can we break down taboos around reporting and build trust within these communities, so that the women feel comfortable talking about domestic violence?" she says.

COMPLEX FACTORS

Researchers from Western trained their GLAPD collaborators to conduct a series of focus group sessions. Volunteers from Rwanda, Burundi, Congo and Uganda took part. Dagistanli's team also interviewed other stakeholders such as healthcare professionals, frontline workers, and community pastors.

The findings were illuminating. The researchers discovered that one factor contributing to the high rates of domestic violence is the cultural dissonance migrants experience upon moving to Australia.

"Our culture is a patriarchal one where men just provide money for the household but don't do housework," explains Shema. Back home, a wife often has extended family, close-knit community members, house boys, maids, and so on, to help her with the children and household chores. But these support lines disappear

in Australia "and some men stay the way they are, so the woman has to do everything, which is very overwhelming"

"The wife might ask: 'Can't you see that I need help here?' And that becomes a trigger for fights," she adds.

The lack of familial support also manifests in other ways. "There is a cultural reluctance to seek support outside the extended family," says Dagistanli. Airing your 'dirty laundry', even among close friends, is considered shameful and taboo.

Instead, it is the extended family that steps in to help a troubled couple. A battered wife, for instance, might seek shelter at her parents' home, a practice called 'kwahukana.' Her husband would then have to win her back by performing a 'gucyura' ceremony — visiting his in-laws, accompanied by friends and family elders,

bearing gifts to seek forgiveness.

"This sort of tradition keeps things in check back in their home countries," says Dagistanli. But without extended families to intervene in their new home, problematic and dangerous situations are more likely to develop.

Additionally, the researchers discovered that the threat of domestic violence is further compounded by other social and structural factors, such as men feeling disempowered in low-paying jobs. Still, the majority of cases (up to 80% according to one service provider interviewed), often go unreported because of a sense of mistrust towards Australian institutions, such as the police, and concerns about racism.

EDUCATION AND TRUST

One solution is to "build bridges and trust between mainstream and diaspora communities," says

Dagistanli. To do so, frontline workers, police, and external support service providers need to be educated so that they can provide "culturally sensitive, non-paternalistic, and meaningful support."

But members of the Great Lakes community have to be educated too, she says, "to learn about the systems and support available here." Involving church leaders in such training would be a "huge draw card" because they are greatly revered in the predominantly Christian diaspora community.

Since publishing their findings in a report two years ago, the team has managed to attract funding to raise awareness, and provide education and support to the women and communities affected. GLAPD has now produced a series of videos for its website, aimed at raising awareness around domestic violence. It has also hired a support worker dedicated to handling domestic violence cases, and an educational officer who conducts workshops in the community.

The education revolves around teaching women about their rights, how to seek employment, and how to set up their own bank account, among other practical advice.

Empowered, Isheja eventually got a job and divorced Mugabo. She now lives happily in a different state.

The impacts of this research have also been evident within the community. As Shema says: "You can see that people are now a little more open and understanding." ■

**names have been changed to protect privacy*



Culturally sensitive support is needed to fight domestic violence.



Eka Nari Sanghathan members preparing millet seeds for sowing.

STRONGER TOGETHER: SINGLE WOMEN REVIVE SUSTAINABLE FARMING

A collective in rural India is boosting the status of single women and fighting hunger by returning to traditional techniques.

Women who are farmers in India are widely expected to work as free labourers on family farms. They rarely own the land and, in some cases, have no role in deciding how it is managed. Single women in rural communities must fend for themselves and will often work even when unwell just to make ends meet. A women's collective in India, supported by research

from Western Sydney University, is trying to change this.

In 2013, Bhavya Chitranshi, now a PhD student at the Institute for Culture and Society at Western, moved to Emaliguda in eastern India to immerse herself in the community of a Kondh Adivasi (Indigenous) tribe. The aim was to spend a year researching and designing a project to support sustainable

development within the community. "As a young, single woman in an unfamiliar place, I felt most comfortable among women," she says. "We worked in the fields, spent time together cooking, bathing and completing chores, and as we shared our life stories, it became clear that being single here was a unique and challenging experience." Nearly one third of women

in Emaliguda are unmarried, separated, or widowed, while others have husbands who do not provide much support. Chitranshi decided to explore what it was like to be a single adivasi woman and began holding open discussions with her new friends. "At first, everyone felt extremely vulnerable talking about the challenges of singleness," she

says. “But slowly they began opening up as they saw value in, and derived strength from, sharing their lives with each other.”

The group soon evolved into the Eka Nari Sanghathan, which means “single women’s collective”. Together, the women rented some land and adopted a collaborative approach to agriculture, dividing labour by ability and sharing the produce equally. For Sanghathan member Mami Pedenti, it is a long-awaited opportunity for single women to be recognised and valued as farmers who are economically independent and self-sufficient. “We should not have to depend upon anyone for our basic needs,” she says.

“We deserve year-round food security and to live a healthy life. This is possible through eating healthily and farming sustainably. If we kill the planet today, what will our future generations live off?” she adds.

Chitranshi organised a trip to a demonstration farm so the women could see that sustainable farming was viable. “We now cultivate our own seeds and make our own organic fertilisers, so we can grow healthy food while protecting the land, forests, soils and insects that keep the whole ecosystem alive,” says Chitranshi. By adopting traditional, ecologically sensitive techniques, the Sanghathan is rejecting the industrialised, technology- and profit-based

systems introduced by the Green Revolution, where farmers were encouraged to use chemical fertilisers and to plant high-yielding hybrid seed varieties

and cash crops. “The adivasi farmland had been transformed from growing Indigenous pulses, millet and oilseeds, to growing major cash crops, like cotton and eucalyptus,” explains Ashutosh Kumar from Groningen University in Netherlands, who works with Chitranshi on the project. “But Eka Nari Sanghathan is taking back the art of cultivation to produce food for self-consumption. They have already revived several Indigenous crops by selecting seeds that work harmoniously with nature.” And this harmony defines the politics of the Sanghathan. “Many people doubted our approach, but now they are coming to us for advice,” adds Chitranshi.



Sanghathan members sowing rice.

© Eka Nari Sanghathan; (map) © negoworks/Stock/Getty

The collective now produces enough food for its own sustenance and sells the surplus, keeping the profits in a communal bank account to be shared collectively. In addition, the Sanghathan started saving additional money on a monthly basis to support group members who, if in need, are able to borrow money from the fund for agriculture, sustenance, and medical expenses. “So they’re not just depending on external funds and support,” says Chitranshi.

“Before, people didn’t even know who the single women in our community were, but now they are starting to recognise our struggle,” says Pedenti. “Whatever type of struggle people face, gender, class, or identity, we need different kinds of Sanghathans to transform these oppressions. Because together, people can work on any issue that’s important to them.”

Chitranshi is now writing her PhD thesis based on almost a decade working with Eka Nari Sanghathan and is planning to make a film documenting the

NEED TO KNOW

- Western’s Bhavya Chitranshi helped establish Eka Nari Sanghathan, a single women’s collective in India.
- The collective practises sustainable farming using traditional techniques.
- They produce enough food for themselves and are able to sell the remainder.



Sanghathan members with their harvests.



process. She found that being locked out of Australia for two years due to the COVID-19 travel ban, and limited access to the village while living in Odisha, gave her significant time to reflect on the work and her place in it. “I was about 20 minutes away from where the women lived, but I was not allowed to go to the village for most of that time due to lockdown,” she recalls. “And it was really when I was locked inside that house alone that I realized how very important the work was for my own sense of self.”

But at the same time, she believes her absence may have had positive benefits. For the first time, Chitranshi was unable to be present during the planning stage, and the women were anxious and frequently phoning her. “But when they did the whole process, without me

physically being there, I think that gave the whole collective the confidence that they can do this themselves, even if I’m not there,” she says. “It’s a more sustainable process — now, more than ever.”

However, the process was made significantly more challenging during COVID-19 due to restrictions on mobility of seeds and other agricultural inputs. While it was risky at the time to get together to do farming collectively, the Sanghathan members realized it was important to produce food for themselves and for others in the village. “Because we had our collectively leased farmland, we were able to grow enough food during the pandemic,” recalls Pedenti. “Elsewhere a lot of people were struggling, especially those who only produced cash crops. The market was down

for a long time, and it was difficult to procure food from outside. In that time, most people in the village relied on local food crops and we were able to ensure food security for the Sanghathan members.”

Next, Chitranshi would like to help Emaliguda establish a decent healthcare system, though she also appreciates what they have already achieved, both spiritually and politically (including securing single women a pension as well as securing government financial aid for building houses).

“It has been so inspiring to see how strong single women are when they come together,” she says. “Working in a collective, you experience the beauty of relationships, female friendships and the value of sharing joy and love even when life gets difficult. It has definitely been a life-changing experience.” ♥



FINDING THE FORMULA FOR **MATHS** **AND SCIENCE** ENGAGEMENT

Using educational psychology to boost participation of young women in STEM.

Dr Erin Mackenzie is on a mission that started during her time as a high-school science teacher. She wants to get more young people, especially young women, engaged in and choosing science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) careers.

“The more kids that are engaged in science, the more scientifically literate our society is going to be,” she explains.

At Western Sydney University, Mackenzie — a senior lecturer in educational psychology and STEM — is drawing on both her science and secondary education backgrounds to better understand the barriers to STEM education for girls in high school, and what can be done to overcome them.



© Stanislaw Pytel/Stone/Getty

Emphasising the real world relevance of STEM subjects is important, particularly for girls.

Mackenzie says she became a teacher because she loved both science and teaching, but after a few years in schools, she became interested in educational psychology and how that might be applied to support more girls to stay engaged with STEM, which prompted her move into academia.

“If we know student attitudes can be changed, let’s identify the attitudes that need to be changed before we lose them out of certain STEM subjects,” she says. For example, girls made up only 20% of the students who took physics at HSC level last year — although they are equally matched with boys in their academic outcomes in the field. Biological sciences in contrast has almost twice as many female students as male students.

The best way to understand student attitudes to STEM is to hear from young people themselves. So Mackenzie, along with co-investigators Distinguished Professor Kathryn Holmes and Dr Nathan Berger, is working with seven private and selective high schools in western Sydney to survey their students in years eight, nine and 10.

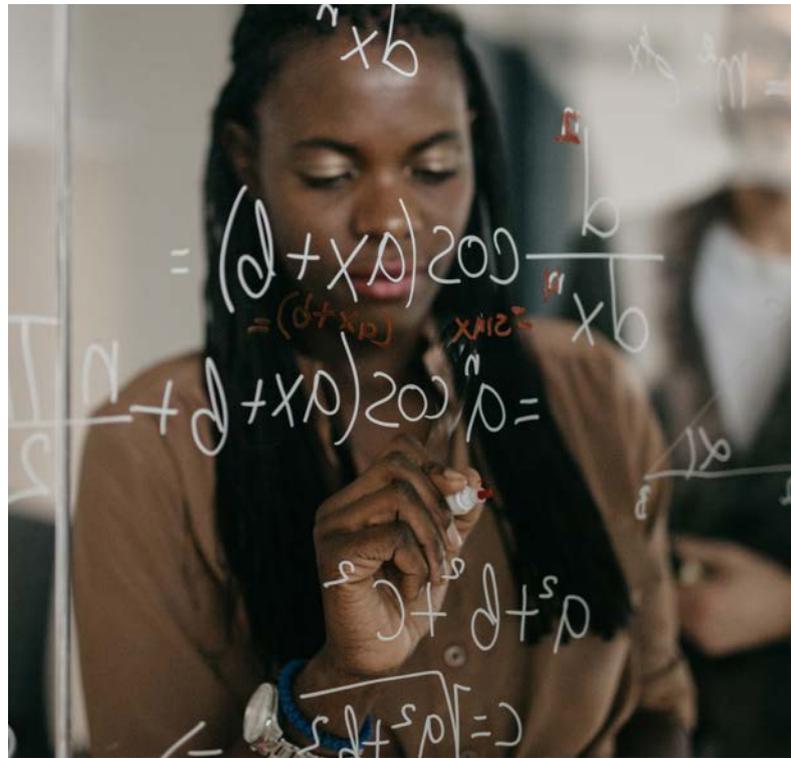
The online survey explores factors such as students’ ‘self-efficacy’ in science, which is a measure of how confident they are in their ability to learn science; their beliefs around whether people have an innate aptitude in STEM subjects, or whether it’s possible to grow and learn; and their levels of anxiety around maths and science.

The survey also assesses their enjoyment of science, and how relevant and useful they believe science is. Most importantly, it asks students how keen they are to take various STEM subjects.

“If we can identify which of the attitudes influence the extent to which students intend to take biology, chemistry and physics, then we can work with the teachers to say ‘this is the thing that you need to do to intervene in your particular school,’” Mackenzie says.

It was also important for the survey to separate out the different sciences, which otherwise tend to get grouped under the one heading of ‘science’. “That allows us to tease apart a little bit some of those gender differences,” she says.

Mackenzie stresses the importance of not just studying



Mathematics and science are taught in separate silos in Australia.

students’ attitudes, but developing practical ways that teachers can work with students to influence these attitudes. “Students’ attitudes are very changeable, and can be malleable depending on the things that teachers do in the classroom,” she notes.

The study will be looking

both at the survey results as a whole, as well as how they vary between individual schools.

FIGHTING MATHS ANXIETY

One of the schools participating in the study is already getting feedback from the survey results and working out how to apply those to increase uptake of STEM subjects.

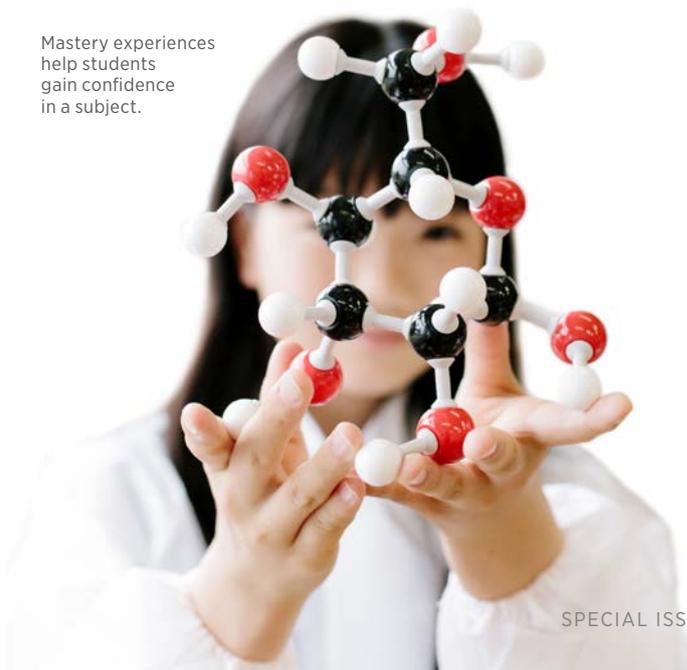
“Being involved in the project has highlighted a couple of key areas where we can take action,” says a teacher participant. “That’s the most empowering thing about how this research has been designed, it’s not purely theoretical — it’s grounded in a practical mentality.”

While the study is still underway, it has already delivered some valuable insights into the drivers of, and barriers to, choosing STEM subjects in high school.

NEED TO KNOW

- Western researchers are investigating why girls may decide against taking STEM courses.
- They found that maths anxiety and lack of understanding of how they will use the subject in their daily lives contributes to this.

Mastery experiences help students gain confidence in a subject.





Maths anxiety can be a barrier to students choosing to take physics and chemistry courses.

One of the key findings so far is that students with greater anxiety about maths are less likely to choose to study not just physics, but chemistry as well. “In most schools in Australia we teach mathematics and science in separate silos, but that’s not how they interact in the real world,” Mackenzie says. The study also found that maths anxiety was more common in girls, which may explain gender differences in enrolments in subjects such as physics.

That observation has led to a focus on the importance of getting maths and science teachers together — something which has already started happening at some of the schools, after Mackenzie’s research team presented its findings.

“Because we found that link between maths anxiety and students being less likely to take

“WE NEED TO REMOVE THOSE BARRIERS THAT MAKE GIRLS THINK STEM IS NOT FOR THEM.”

physics and chemistry, they then started having those professional conversations [about how to better collaborate] that wouldn’t have happened without their students’ data,” Mackenzie says.

Mackenzie and her colleagues are also hoping to develop a scale to measure STEM anxiety, to complement an existing ‘maths anxiety’ scale. “We are interested in whether there are better ways to measure a broader view of anxiety across the sciences,” she says.

The survey also highlighted the importance of a student’s confidence in their ability to learn a subject, and in their choice of which subjects to study. Teachers can help boost confidence by ensuring students have ‘mastery experiences’, whereby they succeed at a particular task in a subject. This helps to convince them they are capable of doing something well and also means that they worry less about making mistakes as part of the learning process.

REAL WORLD IMPACT

Surprisingly, the survey also found that just because students enjoy science, that doesn’t mean they will choose it as a subject. What was more important to their decision was how relevant they thought STEM was to their future lives.

“Students often ask, ‘When am I ever going to use this?’”

Mackenzie says. “Responding to that is a very easy intervention, because it’s about being explicit to students about how what we’re learning right now influences them or is aligned with their everyday life.”

Dr Isabelle Kingsley, research associate for the Office of the Women in STEM Ambassador — an Australian government initiative which aims to address gender inequities in STEM — says previous findings support the importance of emphasising the real-world relevance of STEM subjects for all students, but particularly girls, whom she says tend to have a greater interest in the social context of what they’re learning and doing.

“A lot of people think an engineering job means you’re going to build bridges,” Kingsley says. “There are so many other things that you can do with engineering that will really have a positive impact on the world.”

The study has already generated two research papers and several conference presentations, and Mackenzie is preparing the reports that will go back to individual schools detailing what the survey has revealed about their students’ attitudes and beliefs about STEM. “We’ll talk to the schools about what sorts of things they can possibly do,” she says.

While there have been major gains in increasing the number of female role models in STEM, Kingsley says changing teaching approaches to STEM is vital. “We need to change how we teach STEM subjects to remove those barriers that make girls think that STEM is not for them.”

Erin Mackenzie’s research is on the right track to achieve this. ♥

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