Taking Action to Challenge Sexism, Inequality and Violence Against Women

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What an interesting time it has been for opening up discussions about violence, inequality and sexism against women in Australia. Debates and commentary in the media, in parliament, in public opinion and out on the streets, have really raised the stakes – as well as the questions: Is Australia Sexist? Is gender inequality still a problem in modern Australia? And, importantly, what can we do about it?

Some of the most high profile and recent examples of sexism, gender inequality and violence against women barely need mentioning.

Last month, radio presenter Alan Jones won the Gold Ernie – an award dedicated to Australia’s most sexist comments – for saying of several female leaders that “women are destroying the joint”.

Two weeks ago, Prime Minister Julia Gillard delivered a speech naming sexism in Australian politics that has sparked debate and made the news worldwide.

And how can I not mention the thousands who marched in honour of Jill Meagher – and against violence against women – in September, and those who marched again on Saturday for Reclaim the Night.

Together these, and other, high profile examples tell us something important about sexism, gender inequality and violence against women in this country.

These examples tell us that sexism, gender inequality and violence against women are still big social issues – and that a lot of Australians want to live in a society where they do not exist.

But these are just some examples and they are not the whole picture; they tell just one part of the story.

And while some public commentators have dismissed such examples as rare occurrences that do not prove the persistence of gender inequalities in Australia; [indeed, some journalists and social commentators have used the last two weeks to deny that sexism or gender inequality still exist]; there are in fact many dimensions of women’s experience that tell us quite clearly that sexism, gender inequality and violence against women remain serious problems in our communities.

So in the time that I have this evening, I want to talk to three points.

That violence against women is prevalent in our community.

That violence against women is linked to cultures of sexism and gender inequality.

And finally, that there is growing support in our communities to take a stand against violence, sexism and gender inequality.
First, Violence against women is prevalent in our communities.

Let’s highlight a few well-established facts.

The impact of violence on the lives of Australian women and their children are far-reaching and cut across lines of age, ethnicity, ability and class. For some women that impact is lethal.

Intimate partner homicides account for 20 per cent of all homicides, and four out of five of these involve a man killing his female partner (Davies & Mouzos 2007).

According to the Australian Personal Safety Survey (ABS 2006) one in three women (33 per cent) report experiencing at least one incident of physical violence since the age of 15, while approximately one in six adult women (16 per cent) report experiencing physical or sexual violence from a partner.

Nearly one in five women have also indicated that they have experienced sexual assault since the age of 15, again, most commonly at the hands of a known man such as a boyfriend, acquaintance or family member (ABS 2007; 2006).

Taken together, this data reflects the overall gendered nature of violence against women; while men who experience violence are most likely to be assaulted by a male stranger, women continue to be most likely assaulted by a current or former male partner or family member (ABS 2006; Morgan 2002; Mouzos & Rushforth 2003).

These findings are consistent with those of earlier Australian research which indicated that about a third of Australian women surveyed have experienced some form of physical or sexual violence during their lifetime, most often at the hands of a current or former intimate partner, or other known man (Mouzos & Makkai 2004; ABS 1996).

The prevalence of women’s experiences of physical and sexual violence is unacceptable – and has no place in modern Australia.

Yet, disturbing as these data are, they do not include women’s experiences of emotional, social or financial abuse. Nor do they include the one in five women who report experiencing sexual harassment in Australian workplaces (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2008). Or the experiences of pressured and unwanted sex that much research, including my own, suggests is common for young women in particular (Powell, 2010).

It is undeniable that violence against women is a serious social problem affecting Australian communities.

But what is perhaps talked about less often, is that violence against women is linked to cultures of sexism and gender inequality.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has long identified gender inequality as one of the key factors contributing to violence against women (WHO, 2005;2010). Markers such as women’s relative poverty to men’s; women’s workforce and educational participation; women’s representation as leaders in politics, as well as
business and industry; are all important indicators of gender inequality. And while gender inequality may prevent individual women from having the resources they need to leave violent relationships, or to access justice in response to violence; such inequality is also implicated in why violence against women occurs in the first place.

Gender inequality is itself the material impact of a culture that values women and women’s contributions to society differentially to men’s. This culture of gender inequality, which says that women are worth-less comparative to men, is part of the same culture than condones, tolerates or dismisses men’s violence against women.

We know, from the National Community Attitudes Towards Violence Against Women Survey that attitudes supporting gender inequality, and sexist attitudes supporting stereotypes about men’s and women’s differential roles in society, are linked to attitudes condoning violence against women (VicHealth, 2010). In other words, individuals whose attitudes reflect gender inequality and sexism tend to also hold attitudes that show support for violence against women.

This is why it is so important that when we talk about taking action to stop violence against women – we need to also talk about taking action to stop cultures of sexism and gender inequality in our communities.

And this leads me back to my opening question: what can we do about it?

It is the case – and I think our media often demonstrates this to us – that there is a lot of denial of the persistence of sexism and gender inequality in our society.

Sometimes there is even aggression directed towards anyone who speaks out against sexism, gender inequality and violence against women.

And because of this, if you are someone who speaks out - or wants to speak out - you could be forgiven for thinking that you were alone. But you’d be wrong.

There is growing support in our communities for individuals and organisations to take a stand against sexism, gender inequality and violence against women.

In the recent research “More than Ready” commissioned by VicHealth, I report on the findings of a Statewide survey which explored the readiness of the Victorian community to take action and say something when witnessing sexism, discrimination or violence against women (VicHealth, 2012).

In our survey around one-third or 29% of Victorians reported having witnessed sexist or discriminatory attitudes and behaviour towards women either at work, in their local sports club or among friends or family in the last twelve months.

But there was also strong support in the Victorian community for individual bystanders to take action when they witness sexism or discrimination towards women.

Of those Victorians who reported witnessing sexism or discrimination against women, almost half reported that they did say or do something to express their disapproval to those attitudes or behaviours.
The most common action taken was simply to say something to express their disapproval, such as ‘That’s not funny’, or ‘I don’t agree with that’, or ‘It’s not necessary to speak like that’.

The most common reason given people gave for stepping up in these ways was that they believed in equality and didn’t agree with sexism.

But what the findings also showed is that while almost half of Victorians do already take action as bystanders – there are many more who don’t agree with sexism or discrimination, who feel uncomfortable these behaviours - but who don’t feel able to say or do anything.

Some of the most common reasons given for not acting were that people thought it was none of their business, or that those around them would not support them saying something - that there might be an awkward or confrontational moment.

In sum, what we found was that Victorians are more likely to take action as bystanders to sexism and discrimination against women when they believe the behaviour is serious; and where they believe they will have strong support from their peers, colleagues or community.

*In other words, every time we take action to challenge sexism and discrimination against women – we encourage others to take action as well.*

Where sexism, discrimination and violence against women go unchallenged - they are effectively condoned and allowed to continue.

We need to continue to work together and support each other to take action - whether in our various roles as individuals, or as leaders in our local community, whether at our local sports club, community group, or workplace. We all have the capacity to take action rather than be silent bystanders to sexism, inequality and violence against women.

Thankyou.
References


