



Survey reveals young people's troubling attitudes towards violence against women

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A research survey by Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS) has found that most young Australians aged 16-24 support gender equality, reject attitudes supportive of violence against women, and say they would act (or would like to act) if they witnessed the abuse or disrespect of women. However, responses to the *National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (NCAS)* also found evidence of troubling attitudes among some young people, and particularly among some young men.

While the evidence shows that men are far more likely than women to perpetrate partner violence and are more likely to use frequent, prolonged and extreme violence, the number of young people aged 16-24 who recognise that men are more likely to commit acts of domestic violence fell from 75% in 2009 to 60% in 2017. Correspondingly, the number of young people who believe that men and women are equally likely to perpetrate domestic violence increased from 23% in 2009 to 36% in 2017.

The opinions of some young people on women's right to sexual consent are also disturbing, with the survey finding that 14% of young men and 11% of young women think that women mean 'yes' when they say 'no'. In addition, 14% of young Australians believe that a man is justified in forcing a woman to have sex if she initiates intimacy but then changes her mind, and 13% are not aware that non-consensual sex within marriage is a criminal offence. Also of concern, over one-quarter of young people (26% of young women and 30% of young men) believe that if a woman sends a nude image to her partner, she is partly to blame if he shares it without her consent.

Overall, however, the survey found that young men demonstrated "a lower level of understanding and held less favourable attitudes towards violence against women and gender equality than young women". Nearly one-third (32%) of young men aged 16-24 agreed that, "A lot of times, women who say they were raped had led the man on and then had regrets", while 18% believe that women often make false allegations of sexual assault.

One-quarter of young males think women find it flattering to be persistently pursued, even if they are not interested. One in five (20%) do not understand that using technology to track their partner's movements, such as logging into her social media accounts or installing spyware on her phone, is abusive behaviour, and 16% do not understand that harassment by repeated emails or text messages is a form of violence against women.

Nearly one-third (30%) of young males aged 16-24 think there is no harm in making sexist jokes about women when they are with their male friends and 22% say men should take control in relationships and be the head of the household. Interestingly, however, 43% of both sexes agreed that "it's natural for a man to want to appear in control of his partner in front of his male friends".

In terms of gender inequality in the workplace, 57% of young men believe that many women mistakenly interpret innocent remarks or acts as being sexist (compared with 41% of young women); 52% of young men believe that many women exaggerate how unequally women are treated in Australia (compared with 37% of young women); and 17% of young males believe that "men generally make more capable bosses than women" (compared with 8% of young women).

The *National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (NCAS)* is based on a 2017 telephone survey of a representative sample of more than 17,500 Australians aged 16 years and over, including 1,761 young people aged 16-24 years. Overall, the survey shows that young people have a lower level of understanding of violence against women compared with older age groups; that young women are disproportionately more likely to be victims of violence; and that young men are more likely than older men to be perpetrators of violence against women.



The report authors write that research shows that efforts to prevent violence against women among young people need to be framed with their particular social experiences in mind. Young people prefer action-based, interactive and peer-to-peer strategies rather than “top-down passive learning”. Schools, sport and recreation activities, media and popular culture (particularly social media), family and peer contexts are highlighted as settings in which benefits are likely to be achieved through focusing on influencing young people’s attitudes and practices.

The NCAS report identifies several areas as priority issues, including:

- **Gender equality:** The idea that “gender equality is no longer a problem” is important because, among the five gender inequality themes included in the survey, it was the strongest predictor of troubling attitudes towards violence against women. In addition, young people aged 16-24 were the most likely age group to hold this view.
- **Domestic violence:** The belief that improvements in gender equality mean that women and men now hold an equal position in society may be leading to the “mistaken belief” among young people that women and men are equally likely to be victims of domestic violence and that the impacts of domestic violence are the same for women as for men.
- **Intimate relationships:** Greater emphasis should be placed on achieving gender equality in the private sphere, including in intimate relationships. This includes promoting attitudes that foster a mutually respectful approach to gender relations, as well as challenging the idea that women lie about violence or use violence as a way to gain a tactical advantage over men.

While the NCAS report shows that understanding and attitudes towards violence against women and gender equality among young people are “tracking in the direction of positive change overall”, there are still areas that are cause for concern. The strongest predictor of young people holding troubling views is having a low level of understanding about violence against women, followed by holding prejudicial views towards people on the basis of other attributes, and expressing a high level of support for the use of violence in general. The evidence also shows that people who witness or experience interpersonal violence, such as domestic violence at home, are more likely to hold attitudes supportive of violence against women.

The NCAS report on young people’s attitudes concludes that in order to continue positive changes in this area, it is incumbent upon all of us to promote equal and respectful relationships between women and men. However, it is also important to address other forms of prejudice and discrimination; to challenge violence in all areas of society; and to implement strategies to reduce the exposure of children and young people to interpersonal violence.

References

Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety (ANROWS). (2019). *National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (NCAS)*. Retrieved from: <https://www.anrows.org.au/research-program/ncas/>

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