



Study shows girls from single-sex schools as confident as boys

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When it comes to explaining gender inequality and the gender pay gap, confidence is generally cited as a major reason as to why women do not enter certain fields of work or rise to high-level management positions which attract high salaries and bonuses. However, a major study of gender inequality by University of Queensland researchers has found that girls attending single-sex secondary schools are as confident as their male counterparts. So if it's not confidence in girls and young women that's undermining gender equality, what is?

Dr Terry Fitzsimmons, Senior Lecturer in Leadership at the University of Queensland and Managing Director of the newly-established Australian Gender Equality Council, leads a research team which has found that, contrary to expectations, high school girls have the same level of confidence as boys. Therefore, he says, it is unlikely that it is confidence that is holding women back in the workplace.

Working in collaboration with the Alliance of Girls' Schools Australasia, researchers from the University of Queensland Business School surveyed over 10,000 boys and girls in Years 7 to 12 at Queensland secondary schools. They also interviewed 500 students with regard to their understanding of gender equality, leadership, self-confidence, subject choices, and career aspirations. All of the girls taking part in the research project attended girls' schools in Queensland.

Lead researcher Terry Fitzsimmons recently told Radio National journalist Fran Kelly that "there was no significant difference in self-confidence at any age" between boys and girls in secondary school which, in his words, "dispels the myth that there's a confidence gap". Whatever is happening, says Fitzsimmons, is happening after girls leave school "and probably points to structural issues in the workplace preventing opportunity, rather than an inherent lack of confidence".

One major structural issue noted by researchers is that STEM graduates provide the pool from which most senior executives and CEOs are chosen, yet only 15% of Australian engineering graduates are female and only two-thirds of these women move into critical operational engineering roles which are considered the most valuable when applying for executive and CEO roles later in their careers.

Another interesting and important finding of the research project is that high school girls are less aware of their parents' careers than boys, with 15% of Year 7 girls being unable to name either of their parents' occupations compared with 6% of boys.

Again, Fitzsimmons believes that this goes to the messaging that girls are receiving, rather than to confidence. Boys are being told, or at least receiving the message, very early on about the importance of their career, he says, whereas perhaps girls are being socialised to believe that, while education is important, their long-term career is not. This is evidenced by the fact that, despite girls now earning 58% of university degrees in Australia, they are still receiving subtle messaging inside and outside the home that their long-term career is less important than a boy's.

This flows on to the workplace where less than 3.5% of the CEOs of Australia's top 500 listed companies are women and Australia is 48th in the world in terms of political empowerment for women. Fitzsimmons believes that New Zealand is now significantly ahead of Australia on these measures because they have been more proactive than Australia in addressing gender inequality.

As Fitzsimmons notes, it is interesting that "Australia and New Zealand led the world in terms of participation in democracy" with women being elected to parliament first in Australia, but the right to vote being granted to women first in New Zealand. However, Australia has "come adrift in the last 15 years" and "seems to be standing still whereas other countries, New Zealand among them, are adopting initiatives and just getting on with the job of dealing with gender equality".

Dr Fitzsimmons is also Managing Director of the new Australian Gender Equality Council, which was launched in September. AGECE is an independent, not-for-profit body dedicated to achieving full gender equality in all aspects of Australian life. As Fitzsimmons told Fran Kelly: “We see gender equality as a 50/50 proposition, so not 30%, not 40%, but true representation of our population in all aspects of society, so whether that’s government, or not-for-profit or corporate”.

The mission of the Australian Gender Equality Council is to drive a cultural shift in Australia so that women and men have the same rights and opportunities in terms of pay, superannuation, and treatment in the workplace and in society. It is not acceptable that Australian statistics show that:

- Girls receive 27% less pocket money than boys,
- On average, women earn 23% less than men,
- Women accumulate 42% less superannuation than men,
- 50% of women are discriminated against at work for being mothers, and that
- 1 in 5 women experience sexual violence after the age of 15.

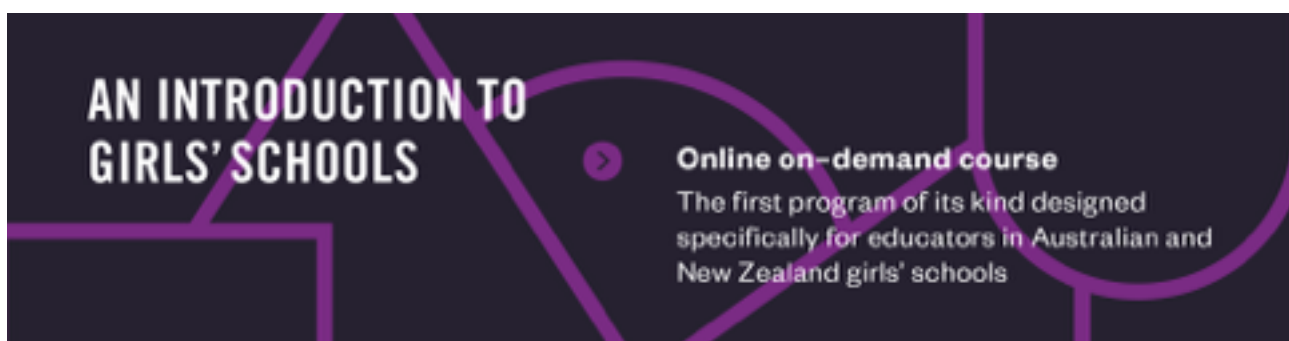
The Alliance of Girls’ Schools Australasia is proud to be a founding member of the Australian Gender Equality Council, which has a member network representing over 500,000 women and girls. Other founding members include Australian Women in Aviation, the Australian Women in Resources Alliance, Australian Women Lawyers, Women in Banking and Finance, Women and Leadership Australia, Women in Digital, and Women in Technology.

The Alliance looks forward to continuing its research collaboration with Dr Terry Fitzsimmons and the University of Queensland Business School, both in terms of their ongoing research into confidence, self-efficacy and leadership in girls, and in its aim to educate girls and their teachers about gender equality and overcoming the barriers that are placed in the way of women’s career progression to managerial, senior executive and CEO roles.

References

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