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Everyday sexism:

Australian women's experiences of street harassment

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Summary

Survey data, along with supporting research, shows that a large majority of Australian women have experienced street harassment, have fears for their safety, and are modifying their behaviour in response to this threat. One woman dies every week from domestic violence¹ and intimate partner violence is the most common cause of homelessness among women.² Data shows that nearly one in five Australian women have experienced sexual violence since the age of 15.³ Sexual harassment is a common occurrence for women, part of the fabric of many women's lives both in public and in the workplace⁴. This paper discusses women's experiences of harassment in public places, sometimes referred to as street harassment.

A recent survey by The Australia Institute shows that:

- 87 per cent of Australian women have experienced at least one form of verbal or physical street harassment.
- Among those who had experienced street harassment:
 - 56 per cent of women were alone when they last experienced street harassment;
 - Three in four women (74 per cent) were harassed by a man or a group of men;
 - A majority of women (54 per cent) were younger than 18 when they first experienced street harassment;
- 40 per cent of Australian women do not feel safe when walking alone at night in the area where they currently live, compared to 17 per cent of men;
- 87 per cent of Australian women have taken at least one action to ensure their own personal safety in the last 12 months (e.g. avoiding walking home alone at night).

Acknowledgement

The Everyday Sexism Project is a website that catalogues instances of sexism experienced by women in Australia on a day to day basis. First-person street harassment experiences from the Everyday Sexism Project are used throughout this paper and the authors wish to thank both the Everyday Sexism Project and the women who shared their experiences on the site.

1 Australian Institute of Criminology (2010), Homicide in Australia: 2008–09 to 2009–10 National Homicide Monitoring Program annual report

2 Australia Institute of Health and Welfare (2012) Specialist Homeless Services Data Collection March Quarter 2012

3 Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012), 4906.0 - Personal Safety, Australia

⁴ Australian Human Rights Commission 2012, Working without fear: Results of the Sexual Harassment National Telephone Survey

Introduction

I was walking home one night on a relatively busy street and from a passing car a young man yelled “I’m gonna rape you”. They didn’t come back and I made it home safely, but I was alone and it frightened me.

E, Everyday Sexism Project⁵

Harassment is a common occurrence for many women and has been referred to by some researchers as an “inevitable part of [women’s] existence”.⁶ Harassment occurs along a continuum from relatively minor events, such as wolf whistling, to more serious events such as violence and assault. Research has shown that all forms of sexual violence are connected as a form of “abuse, coercion and force in order to control women”⁷ and are underpinned by the same social and cultural attitudes.⁸

Since 1995, the National Community Attitudes towards Violence Against Women Survey (NCAS) has been tracking changes in attitudes to violence against women (between 1995, 2009 and 2013).⁹ Over time, the concern over women’s safety in the community has declined. The most recent survey found that:

- Since 1995 there has been a decrease in people who agree that violence is perpetrated mainly by men.
- Between 2009 and 2013 there was a decrease in those who recognise that women are more likely than men to suffer physical harm and fear as a result of this violence.
- Between 2009 and 2013 fewer people agreed that violence against women was common.

In order to determine the extent of harassment against women, The Australia Institute conducted a survey of Australians (n=1426) in November 2014. The survey explored women’s experiences of harassment in public areas and feelings of safety on the streets for both men and women.

The survey results presented below clearly demonstrate the widespread existence of street harassment in Australia. Shockingly, nearly all women – 87 per cent – have experienced some form of street harassment, either non-physical or physical, in their lives. The following sections will detail these experiences of street harassment.

⁵ The Everyday Sexism Project <http://australia.everydaysexism.com/>.

The Everyday Sexism Project is a website that allows women to catalogue experiences of “gender imbalance at every level. From the most minor incidents to the most serious”.

⁶ Tuerkheimer (1997) cited in Fileborn B (2013) Conceptual understandings and prevalence of sexual harassment and street harassment

⁷ Kelly and Radford (1996) cited in Fileborn F (2013)

⁸ Fileborn B (2013)

⁹ Vic Health (2014) *Australian’s attitudes to violence against women. Findings from the 2013 National Community Attitudes towards Violence Against Women Survey (NCAS)*

Non-physical street harassment

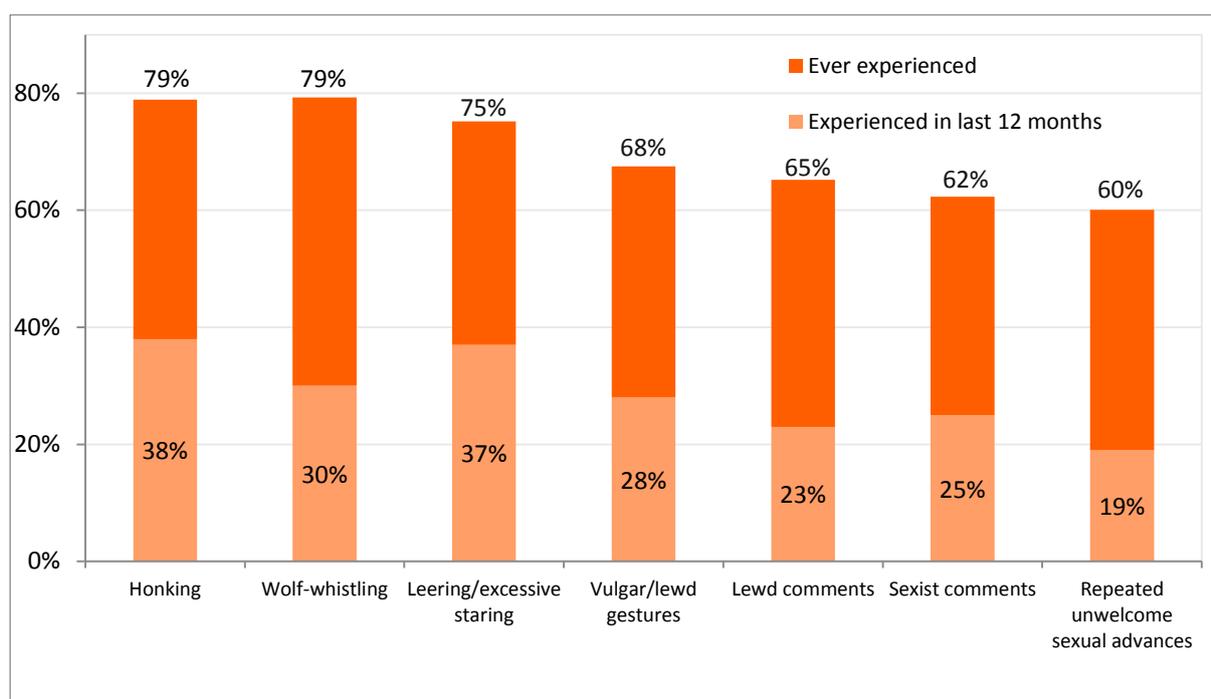
At 1.30pm yesterday I popped out of work and was crossing the road to get my lunch and a young man in a bright yellow car yelled out “I’ll come on your nipples you slut”. Most disturbing. I am a 40 year old mother of two, in broad daylight, I was in work clothes, he was driving so I assume not drunk. Not that if he was it would have made it in the least bit okay, but none of the factors usually used to excuse this kind of behaviour were even present.

J, Everyday Sexism Project

The extent of non-physical street harassment against women is astounding – 84 per cent of women experience some form of non-physical street harassment in their lives. Non-physical street harassment includes verbal actions, such as offensive comments and honking a car horn, as well as non-verbal actions such as excessive staring.

The most common forms of non-physical street harassment are honking and wolf whistling as shown in Figure 1 (79 per cent). Leering is also common – only a quarter of women have not experienced this at some point in their lives, including two in five (37 per cent) women who have experienced it in the last 12 months. Similarly, more than half of all women have experienced lewd gestures (68 per cent), sexist (62 per cent) or lewd comments (65 per cent), while another 60 per cent have been subject to repeated unwelcome sexual advances. It is telling that all of the examples of harassment have been experienced by more than half of all women.

Figure 1: Women’s experiences of non-physical street harassment



Question: When was the last time, if at all, you experienced each of the following types of street harassment by a stranger or strangers (e.g. in a public place, not at work)?

Source: The Australia Institute survey

Physical street harassment

Once I was on the train home and a guy just walked past and put his hand down my top. He got off at the next station. I reported it to the station manager when I got off. He didn't do anything. It's lucky nothing else happened; it was an empty train. I was so angry.

L, Everyday Sexism Project

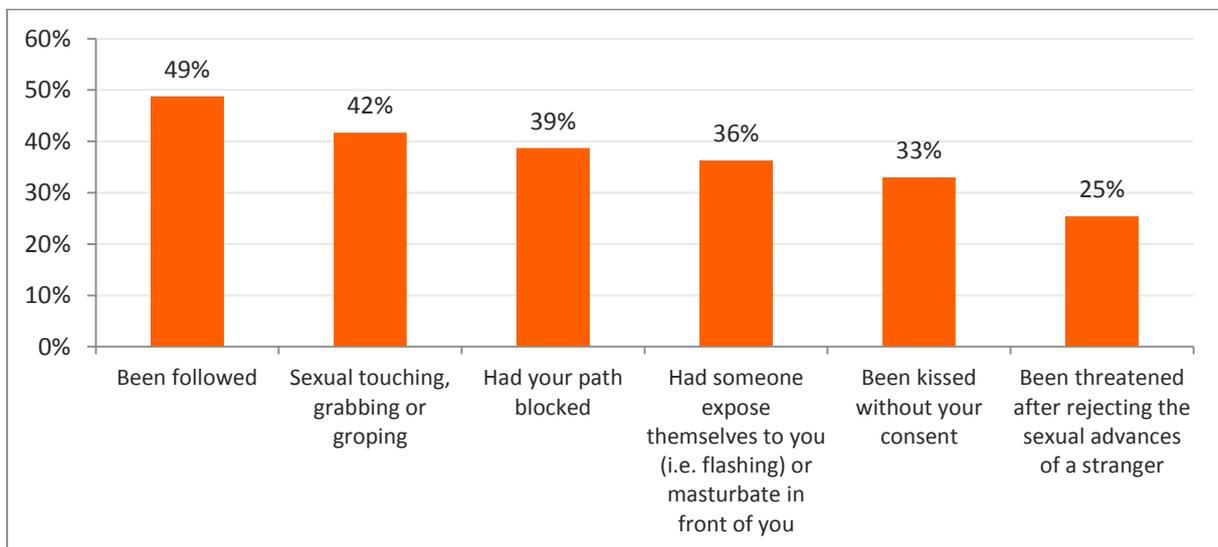
Physical street harassment is also a relatively commonplace occurrence – two thirds of women surveyed (65 per cent) have experienced it. Physical street harassment includes actions such as stalking and blocking someone's path as well as behaviour which could constitute indecent assault, such as kissing or sexual touching without consent.

Figure 2 illustrates the extent and nature of physical street harassment. The most common form of physical street harassment experienced by women is being followed by a stranger or group of strangers. Nearly half of all women (49 per cent) have experienced this and 39 per cent have had their path blocked. This represents a significant number of women who have experienced this form of threatening behaviour at some point in their lives.

Many women have also been subjected to some form of harassment that could constitute indecent assault. For instance, 42 per cent have experienced sexual touching, grabbing or groping by a stranger, while around a third have had someone expose themselves to them (36 per cent) or been kissed without their consent (33 per cent). A quarter of women (25 per cent) have been threatened after rejecting the sexual advances of a stranger.

These figures paint a concerning picture of women's experiences on our streets.

Figure 2: Women's experiences of physical street harassment



Question: when was the last time, if at all, you experienced each of the following types of physical street harassment by a stranger or strangers?

Source: The Australia Institute survey

How does harassment occur?

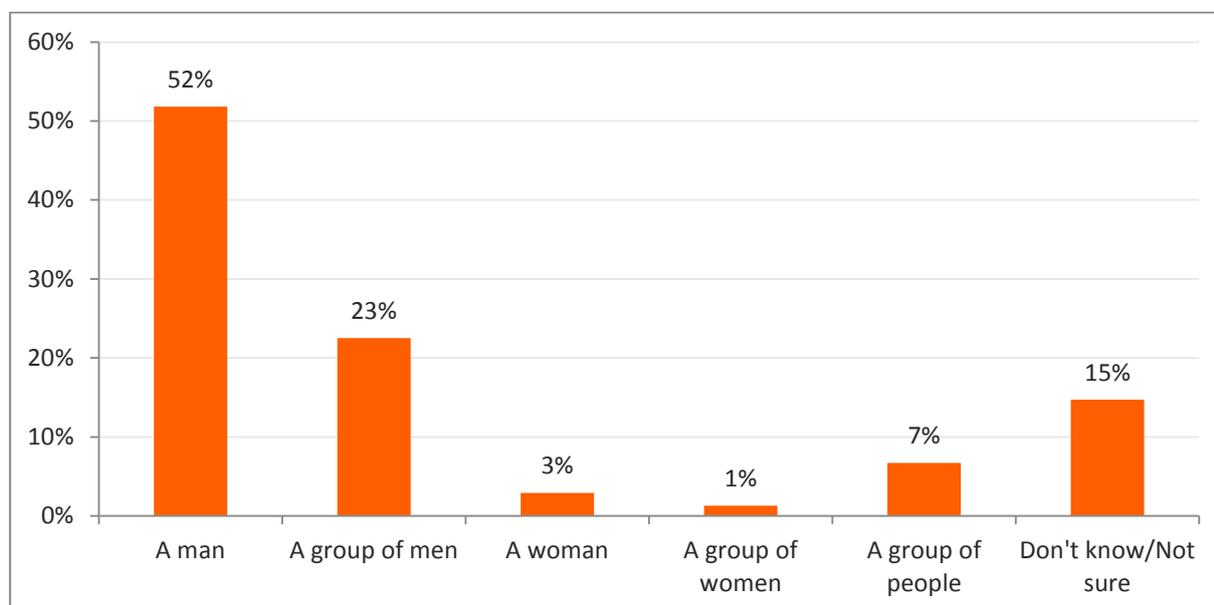
I was on the train with some friends when I noticed a man behind me staring at me. I didn't know what to do so I ignored it thinking I was over reacting, then when I got off, I turned around whilst walking and he was following me with a smirk on his face. I got so nervous and kept going and he kept following me until I ran into the toilets and lost him. I never told my friends about it because I don't know if I was just imagining it, but I am positive that given a chance he would have done something!

M, Everyday Sexism Project

Overwhelmingly, women were subjected to harassment, both non-physical and physical, by men and while alone, as outlined in Figures 3 and 4.

Seventy-four per cent of women said that men were responsible for their latest experience of harassment; individual men were the offenders in 52 per cent of cases, while 23 per cent of the incidents involved groups of men.

Figure 3: Women's last experience of harassment – offender

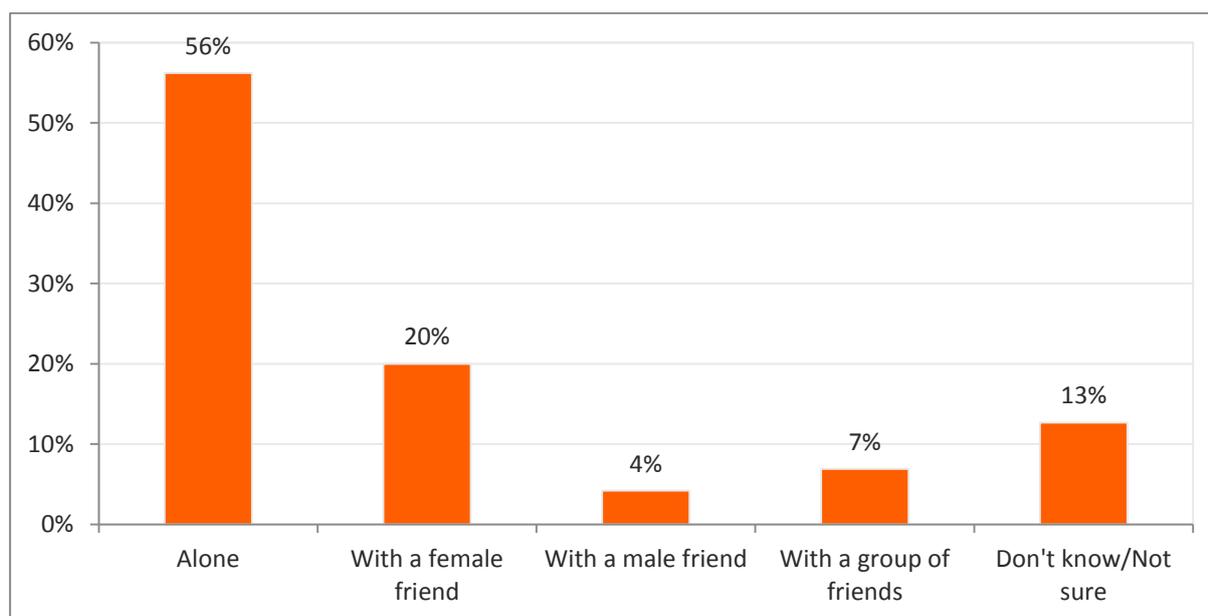


Question: Thinking about the last time you experienced street harassment, was it from ... ?

Source: The Australia Institute survey

Three quarters of women (76 per cent) stated that their last experience of street harassment occurred while they were alone (56 per cent) or with a female friend (20 per cent).

Figure 4: Women's last experience of harassment – company



Question: And were you ... ?

Source: The Australia Institute survey

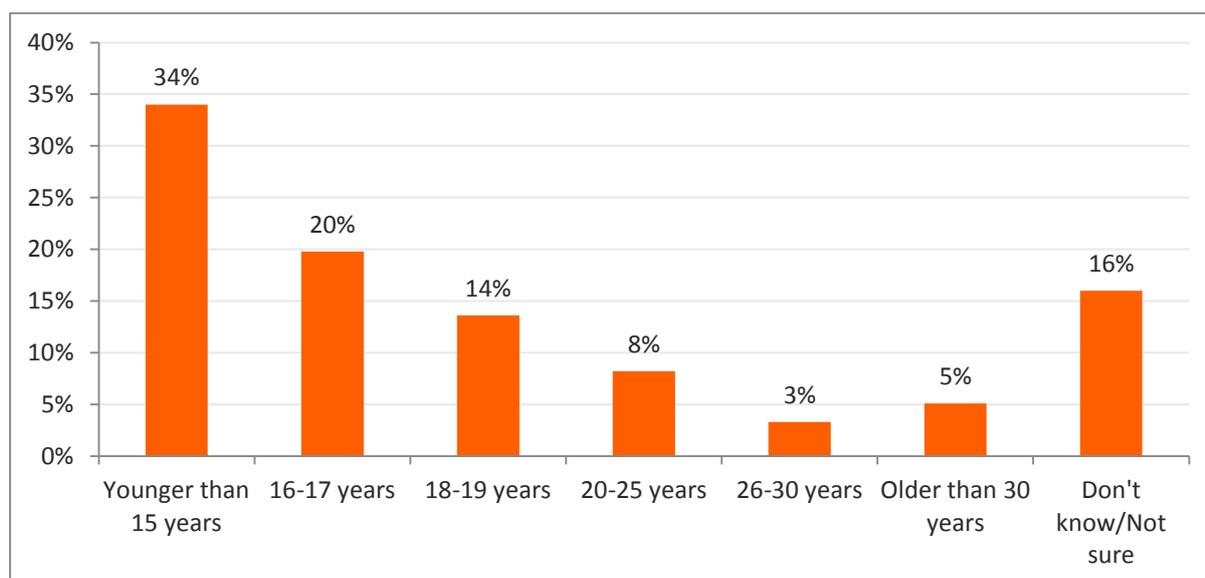
Harassment and age

I'm 17 and I was wearing my school sports uniform waiting for a bus with my friend where four or five other people were sitting around, when an adult man told us how sexy we looked, asked his friends to look how sexy we are and how hot our school sports uniforms were.

T, Everyday Sexism Project

Among Australian women who have experienced street harassment, their first experience is most commonly before the age of 15, with one third (34 per cent) experiencing harassment at this very young age. More than half of women (54 per cent) said they first experienced street harassment before they were 18 years old, by the age of 25 more than three quarters (76 per cent) had their first experience (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Women - Age of first experience of street harassment



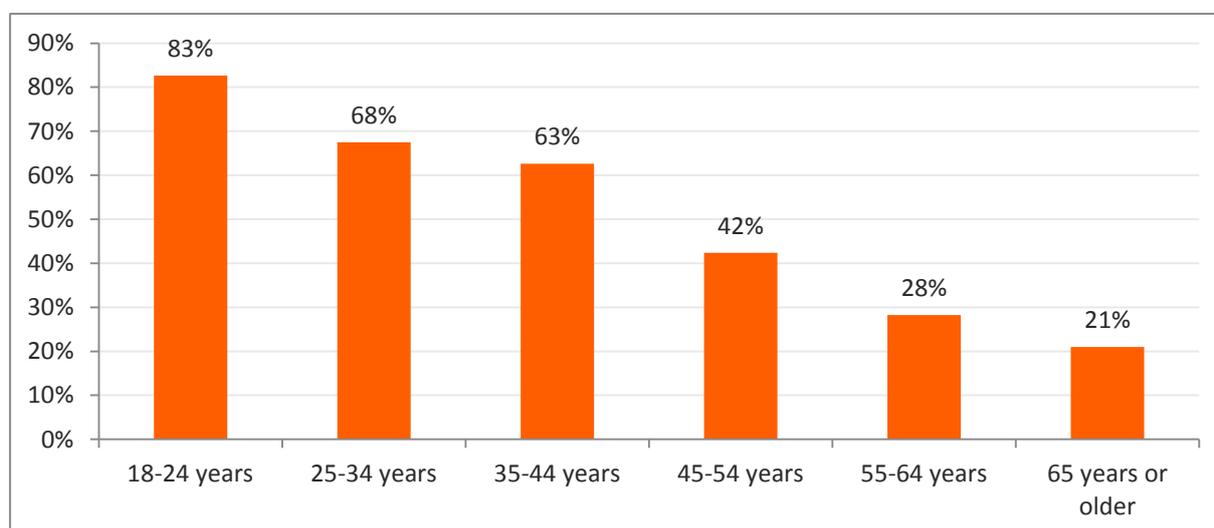
Question: To the best of your recollection, how old were you when you first experienced street harassment?

Source: The Australia Institute survey

Consistent with this trend, younger women were much more likely to have experienced harassment in the last twelve months.

Four in five (83 per cent) women aged between 18 and 24 experienced harassment in the last twelve months compared to 21 per cent of women aged over 65 years.

Figure 6: Women's experiences of harassment in last 12 months – age

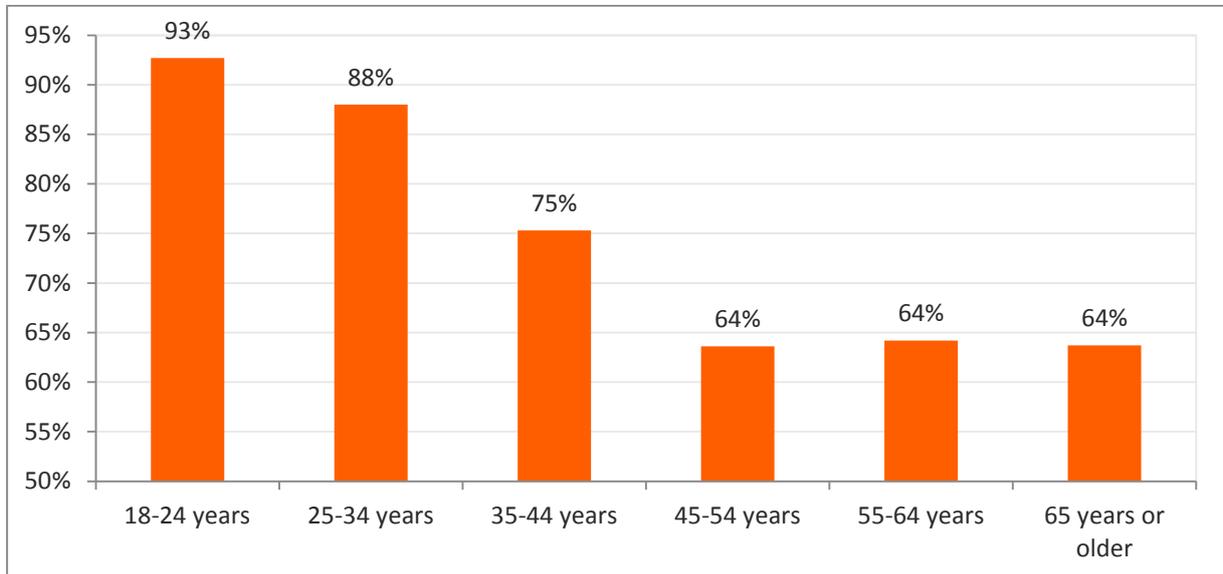


Source: The Australia Institute survey

Younger women are also more likely to take a proactive approach to ensuring their personal safety compared to those who are older. In the past twelve months, 93 per cent of those aged from 18 to 24 changed their behaviour in at least one way to ensure their personal safety (e.g. avoiding walking alone at night). In contrast, 64 per cent of women aged over 45 had done the same (Figure 7).

Interestingly, despite the fact that experiencing street harassment becomes less common as women age (Figure 7), a majority (64 per cent) of women continue to take proactive measures to ensure their personal safety throughout their lives.

Figure 7: Women - Changed behaviour in last 12 months to ensure personal safety – age



Source: The Australia Institute survey

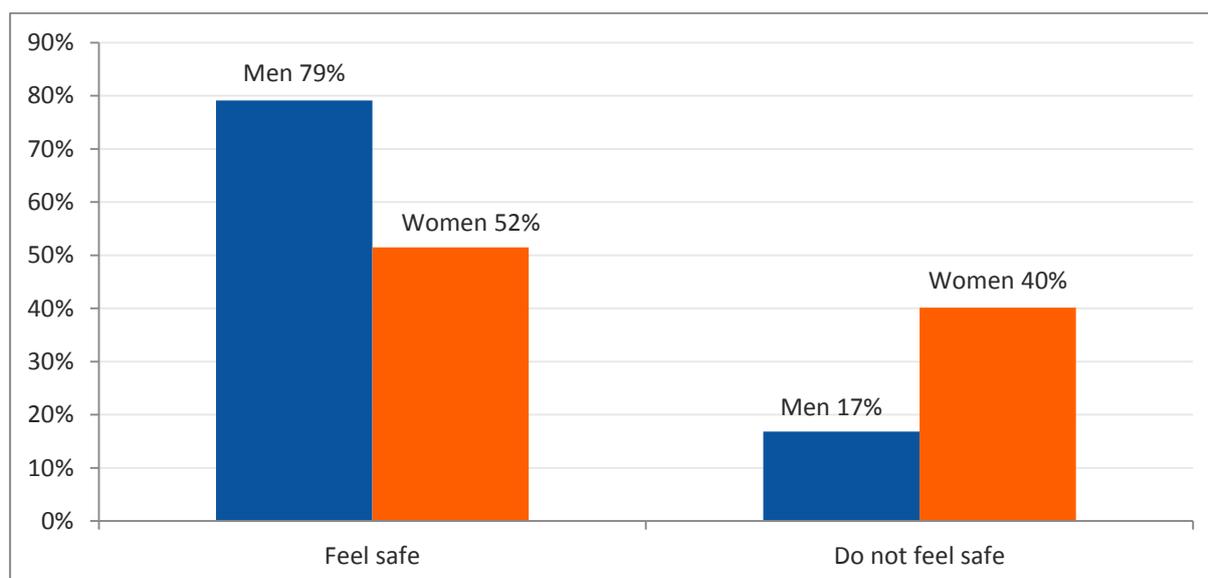
Feeling safe

I was walking home one night on a relatively busy street and from a passing car a young man yelled “I’m gonna rape you”. They didn’t come back and I made it home safely, but I was alone and it frightened me.

E, Everyday Sexism Project

Everyone has the right to feel safe in their own community – but the figures above indicate that many women are exposed to experiences that will likely make them feel unsafe. There is significant gender difference in the feelings of security that people experience (Figure 8). While 79 per cent of men feel safe walking alone at night in their community, only around half of all women do (52 per cent). Mirroring this result, 40 per cent of women feel unsafe in their own community at night, a figure 23 per cent higher than men.

Figure 8: Feeling safe, by gender

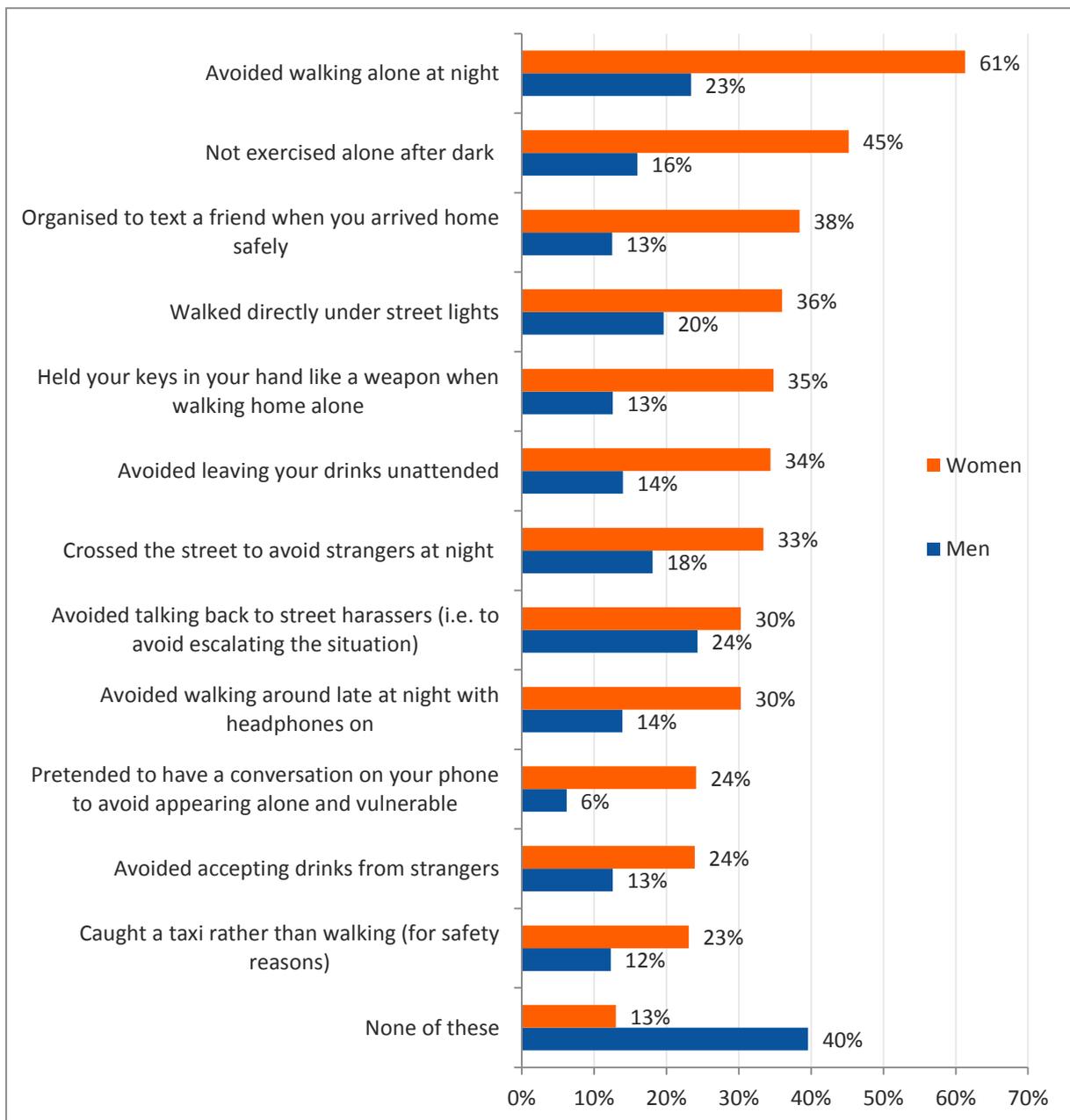


Question: Generally speaking, when walking alone at night in the area where you currently live, do you feel safe?

Source: The Australia Institute survey

This gender gap is even starker when considering the ways that people modify their behaviour to ensure their own personal safety in the last 12 months (Figure 9).

Women are much more likely than men to proactively change their behaviour to ensure their personal safety, a possible response to the prevalence of street harassment against women. For instance, while six in 10 women (61 per cent) have avoided walking alone at night in the past twelve months, only two in 10 men (23 per cent) have done the same. Similarly, nearly half (45 per cent) of women have avoided exercising alone at night, compared to 16 per cent of men – while more than double the number of women (34 per cent) have avoided leaving their drinks unattended. Significantly, 40 per cent of men have not taken any action in the last 12 months to ensure their personal safety, compared to 13 per cent of women.

Figure 9: Actions undertaken to ensure personal safety, by gender

Question: Which of the following things, if any, have you done for your personal safety in the last 12 months?

Source: The Australia Institute survey

Conclusion

The survey results paint a worrying picture of harassment against women in Australia. Almost nine in ten Australian women (87 per cent) have experienced street harassment at some point in their lives.

The results also show that women take a proactive approach to their personal safety, with nine in ten women (87 per cent) modifying their behaviour in at least one way to ensure their own safety within the last year, whether that be organising to text a friend when they arrived home safely, or avoiding leaving their drink unattended.

Shockingly, among those who have experienced street harassment, the majority of women first encounter it before they are even of voting age, while they are still at school. Harassment occurs primarily when women are alone and is conducted, overwhelmingly, by men.

Many women experience sexism, such as honking and wolf whistling, while a large number have also been subjected to more physical forms of harassment – for instance being followed or having their path blocked. These are all forms of harassment that take place on the streets and the prevalence is likely a contributing factor towards many women feeling unsafe within their own community.

It is essential that street harassment against women is recognised as not only a serious issue but also a common one. Many women suffer harassment when going about their daily lives. Political parties and society in general need to recognise the prevalence and seriousness of harassment and act towards helping women feel safe on the streets and in the community.

References

Australia Institute of Health and Welfare (2012) Specialist Homeless Services Data Collection March Quarter 2012

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012), 4906.0 - Personal Safety, Australia

Fileborn B (2013) 'Conceptual understandings and prevalence of sexual harassment and street harassment', Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault.

The Everyday Sexism Project <http://australia.everydaysexism.com/>

Vic Health (2014) *Australian's attitudes to violence against women. Findings from the 2013 National Community Attitudes towards Violence Against Women Survey (NCAS)*, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne, Australia.

Appendix: Survey questions

The Australia Institute conducted an online survey of **1,426** Australians for the research paper in November 2014. Respondents were derived from a reputable independent online panel and selected based on quotas corresponding to age, sex and state/territory.

The survey questions were:

Q. Generally speaking, when **walking alone at night** in the area where you currently live do you feel safe?

Please select one response only

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't know/Not sure

ASK ALL

Q. Which of the following things, if any, have you done for your personal safety in the **last 12 months**?

Please select as many as apply

1. Avoided walking alone at night
2. Held your keys in your hand like a weapon when walking home alone
3. Organised to text a friend when you arrived home safely
4. Walked directly under street lights
5. Crossed the street to avoid strangers at night
6. Avoided leaving your drinks unattended
7. Avoided accepting drinks from strangers
8. Pretended to have a conversation on your phone to avoid appearing alone and vulnerable
9. Avoided talking back to street harassers (i.e. to avoid escalating the situation)
10. Avoided walking around late at night with headphones on
11. Not exercised alone after dark
12. Caught a taxi rather than walking (for safety reasons)
13. Other (please specify)
14. None of these

WOMEN ONLY

Q. When was the last time, if at all, you experienced each of the following types of **street harassment** by a stranger or strangers (e.g. in a public place, not at work)?

Please select one response per row

| | In the last week | In the last month | In the last 6 months | In the last 12 months | In the last 5 years | Longer | Never | Don't know/Not sure |
|--|------------------|-------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|--------|-------|---------------------|
| Wolf-whistling | | | | | | | | |
| Leering/excessive staring | | | | | | | | |
| Honking | | | | | | | | |
| Sexist comments or gendered insults (e.g. bitch, c*nt, whore etc.) | | | | | | | | |
| Lewd (sexually explicit) comments | | | | | | | | |
| Repeated unwelcome sexual advances | | | | | | | | |
| Vulgar/lewd gestures | | | | | | | | |

Q. And when was the last time, if at all, you experienced each of the following types of **physical street harassment** by a stranger or strangers?

Please select one response per row

| | In the last week | In the last month | In the last 6 months | In the last 12 months | In the last 5 years | Longer | Never | Don't know/Not sure |
|--|------------------|-------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|--------|-------|---------------------|
| Sexual touching, grabbing or groping | | | | | | | | |
| Been kissed without your consent | | | | | | | | |
| Had your path blocked | | | | | | | | |
| Been followed | | | | | | | | |
| Been threatened after rejecting the sexual advances of a stranger | | | | | | | | |
| Had someone expose themselves to you (i.e. flashing) or masturbate in front of you | | | | | | | | |

ASK IF EXPERIENCED HARASSMENT

Q. To the best of your recollection, how old were you when you **first experienced street harassment**?

Please select one response only

1. Younger than 15 years old
2. 16-17 years old
3. 18-19 years old
4. 20-25 years old
5. 26-30 years old
6. Older than 30
7. Don't know/Not sure

Q. Thinking about the **last time** you experienced street harassment, was it from...?

1. A man
2. A group of men
3. A woman
4. A group of women
5. A group of people
6. Don't know/Not sure

Q. And were you...?

1. Alone
2. With a female friend
3. With a male friend
4. With a group of friends
5. Don't know/Not sure