



Society for Research in Child Development

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PRESS RELEASE

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Teenage Girls Still Experience Sexual Harassment

Girls and women have made dramatic strides toward gender equality in the United States. Role models and opportunities for girls in science, technology, and sports exist today that were not available 50 years ago. Despite these advances, results from a new study show that teenage girls from diverse ethnic and economic backgrounds continue to experience sexism.

The findings are from a study of 600 girls between the ages of 12 and 18 from California and Georgia. The girls were Latina (49%), White (23%), African American (9%), Asian American (7.5%), and multi-ethnic or other (7.5%), and came from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. The study, the first to examine social and individual influences on girls' personal experiences of sexism, was carried out by researchers at the University of California Santa Cruz and the University of Kentucky. It appears in the May/June 2008 issue of the journal *Child Development*.

In surveys, the researchers asked the girls about their experiences with sexual harassment and about discouraging comments they'd received about their abilities in science, math, or computers, as well as sports. The vast majority (90%) of girls said they had experienced sexual harassment at least once, with few reporting that such experiences had taken place more than once or twice. Specific forms of sexual harassment included receiving inappropriate and unwanted romantic attention (67% of girls), hearing demeaning gender-related comments (62%), being teased because of appearance (58%), receiving unwanted physical contact (52%), and being teased, bullied, or threatened with harm by a male (25%). Furthermore, for most girls, the discouraging comments about their abilities were conveyed simply because they are girls; these comments related to science, math, or computers (52% of girls), as well as athletics (76% of girls). Most of the discouraging comments came from male peers.

Because not all girls perceive sexism equally, the study also examined girls' understanding of this type of prejudice in their lives. The researchers found that both individual and social factors influenced whether girls were aware of sexism, with girls who were older and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds reporting more sexism than their peers. Moreover, Latina and Asian American girls reported less sexual harassment than girls from other ethnic groups.

The types of messages girls heard from others also influenced their reports of sexism. Girls who had learned about feminism through either the media or people they knew (mothers, teachers, etc.) were more likely to recognize it than girls who had never heard about feminism.

Girls who felt pressure from parents to conform to gender stereotypes perceived more sexism than other girls.

Finally, girls' own attitudes about themselves and society affected how they perceived sexism. Girls who felt atypical for their gender or were unhappy with stereotypical gender roles reported more sexism than other girls.

"This study documents the continued pervasiveness of sexism in the lives of adolescent girls," notes Campbell Leaper, professor of psychology at the University of California Santa Cruz and the study's lead author. "When sexual harassment frequently occurs, girls may come to expect demeaning behaviors as normal in heterosexual relationships. And when girls' achievement is discouraged in traditionally male-dominated fields, their potential is limited and society loses potentially talented individuals in important fields such as science and technology."

Recognizing when sexism occurs is a crucial first step toward overcoming discrimination, adds Leaper. "Otherwise, it is more likely that individuals attribute failure to their lack of ability rather than to the obstacles in their environment."

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Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 79, Issue 3, *Perceived Experiences with Sexism Among Adolescent Girls*, by Leaper, C (University of California Santa Cruz), and Brown, CS (University of Kentucky). Copyright 2008 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.