

Culture affects how teen girls see harassment

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Teenage girls of all ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds still experience sexism and sexual harassment – but cultural factors may control whether they perceive sexism as an environmental problem or as evidence of their own shortcomings.

A study of 600 girls between the ages of 12 and 18, from California and Georgia, included young women who identified as Latina (49 percent), White (23 percent), African-American (9 percent), Asian American (7.5 percent) and multi-ethnic or other (7.5 percent) was conducted by researchers Christia Brown, assistant professor, Department of Psychology, University of Kentucky College of Arts and Sciences, and Campbell Leaper, professor, Department of Psychology, University of California Santa Cruz. Participants were asked about experiences with sexual harassment and any discouraging comments they received in traditionally male-dominated areas such as math, science, computers and sports.

Ninety percent of girls reported experiencing sexual harassment at least once. Specifically, 67 percent of girls reported receiving unwanted romantic attention, 62 percent were exposed to demeaning gender-related comments, 58 percent were teased because of their appearance, 52 percent received unwanted physical contact and 25 percent were bullied or threatened with harm by a male. 52 percent of girls also reported receiving discouraging gender-based comments on the math, science and computer abilities, usually from male peers, and 76 percent of girls reported sexist comments on their athletic abilities, again predominantly from male peers.

The researchers found that girls have different levels of understanding of sexism and sexual harassment, which may affect reporting data. Older girls and those from a lower socioeconomic background reported more sexism than did their peers. Latin and Asian American girls reported less sexual harassment than did girls of other ethnic groups. Girls who had been exposed to feminist ideas, either through the media or an adult such as a mother or teacher, were more likely to identify and report sexist behavior than were girls who had no information about feminism. Girls who reported feeling pressure from their parents to conform to gender stereotypes were also more likely to perceive sexism. Girls who felt atypical for their gender and/or were unhappy with stereotypical gender roles were most likely to report sexism and harassment.

Brown and Leaper note that it is important for girls to be able to identify sexism and sexual harassment as environmental factors, lest they attribute negative experiences to their own faults and suffer erosion of self-esteem. Frequent sexual harassment may lead girls to expect and accept demeaning behaviors in heterosexual romantic relationships, and sexist remarks.

The full study appears in the May/June issue of *Child Development*, Vol. 79, Issue 3, under the title "Perceived Experiences with Sexism Among Adolescent Girls."

Source: University of Kentucky

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