

Stopping everyday sexism

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This article by Polis Summer School student David Winter.

While studying in London I have witnessed multiple instances of ‘everyday sexism’. The first was the use of the ‘c’ word, in passing, by an American male while out for drinks. This was overheard by a female in the group, who asked him not to use that word. Sadly, soon after he did, repeatedly. Needless to say, the female was disheartened by his choice. Later that night I overheard one of his friends say that she should not have been upset by his using this word and that he did not like her because of it.

Another instance occurred next to me at the library. A couple was trying to book a weekend trip away. Every time the female started to talk the male interrupted his partner, and told her to ‘listen’ to what he wanted to do. Unfortunately, each time she stopped talking, patiently listened and ended up planning the trip he wanted.

Whether it is in politics, law, arts, science and technology, engineering, media, academia or architecture women are still underrepresented in positions of power. The statistics are damning. According to everydaysexism.com, “only 13% of FTSE 100 corporate board members are female”. The UK House of Commons is no better. There less than a quarter of representatives are female. According to the Australian Public Service’s website less than a third of representatives in both Houses of Parliament are female. The amount of female engineers is even scarier. And the list goes on.

Sexism is not just about professional power. It is about society as a whole. Talking about sexism and gender equality in modern societies, perceived to have gender equality, is increasingly difficult. I have a Burundian friend who studied on scholarship in Australia who was horrified at the level of sexism she found and experienced in a country she perceived to be one of the most developed and civilised in the world. Her own experiences were of being groped in clubs, an experience I have all too often heard repeated by other female friends.

This is why everydaysexism.com was started by Laura Bates. After a bad week of experiencing multiple acts of sexism in 2012, considerably worse than the instances outlined above, she decided to ask her friends about their experiences. What they told her was frightening. Almost all had experienced extreme sexism in the form of physical or verbal abuse.

Everyday Sexism is now a book and Laura commonly appears in the mainstream media spreading the forgotten voice of gender equality. And she has converted her media work into real world results. Everyday Sexism worked with London Transport to train staff which resulted in a significant increase in actions against offensive behaviour on tubes and buses. The key is to stop passively accepting unacceptable actions. In the words of Lieutenant-General David Morrison, a much admired leader in my home country of Australia:

“The standard you walk past is the standard you accept.”

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