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Is Self-Confidence Impacting Women in the Workplace?

The issue of gender equality in the workplace is still a highly debated topic. With the Western Australian economy underpinned by mining, energy and construction industries, where 90% of senior roles are occupied by males, the reason for less women willing to apply for positions has often been attributed to their lack of self-confidence, stemming from childhood and adolescence.

The latest FACTBase Bulletin by the Committee for Perth reports on the findings of the *Hands up for Gender Equality* study which examines gender differences in career interests and why self-confidence and self-doubt play such a significant role in limiting women's career progress. Numerous studies into this area have shown women's level of self-confidence, relative to men's, declines from the age of nine and remains lower through to their mid-seventies.

"It is a sobering reality that a person's future career prospects is determined by their gender from such a young age," said Committee for Perth CEO, Marion Fulker.

"Gender role modeling has a huge impact, with many career interests already entrenched in students before entering high school. The stereotypes created during childhood can lead to women choosing not to enter certain fields and this has structural and cultural implications for industry and society."

The Hands up for Equality report studied over 10,000 students from top-matriculating, single sex schools in sister resource state Queensland. The report looked at overall self-confidence and the activities that could predict self-confidence levels.

Lead Researcher, Dr Terry Fitzsimmons from the University of Queensland who undertook research for the Committee for Perth's *Filling the Pool* project said that 'several reasons for the disparity between male and female self-confidence have been put forward, including gendered organisational structures, societal expectations and the lack of female role models. However, the results from the study indicate that disparity in self-confidence starting in late childhood and continuing into adolescence is not present in girls who attend single sex schools.'

The study also highlighted unsupervised activities were a greater predictor of confidence development with the boost coming from engaging in the activity without direct adult supervision, the same can be applied to having a part time job. Boys are also being given significantly more outdoor related chores compared to their opposite sex and are spending more time overall on outdoor activities.

'The activities that generated the most self-confidence in equal amounts for both boys and girls were travel, team sport and participation in leadership roles, such as school prefect or sports captain' said Dr Fitzsimmons.

The top three reasons for wanting to work were identical for both sexes however when it came to career domains, these were highly gender specific and preferences remained unchanged from year 7 through to year 11. Girls showed a clear preference for social services and healthcare, whilst boys showed a preference for science and technology. Other domains with a noticeable gender difference were in the areas of biological sciences and medicine, and language and literature.

“As Greater Perth continues to grow, industries and their workforces will undergo profound changes yet the research has found distinct preferences for future career roles based on gender which is likely to compound the gender pay gap in Western Australia which has the unenviable title of being the largest in the country,” Mrs Fulker said.

“It is crucial that as a parent or carer we have balanced conversations about career options with our children early so that they can make informed choices. Simple things such as sharing out the chores at home that challenge traditional male and female roles can help to mitigate the gendered attitudes to work and careers.”

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