

# Investigating the ambitions of young women to run for national parliament: the case of Australia

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## ABSTRACT

Like many liberal democracies, there is a gender gap in the Australian Parliament. While there has been growing momentum to increase the number of female parliamentarians in the national legislature, the Parliament of Australia continues to be a male dominated domain. This paper investigates the factors that contribute to maintaining the gender gap by focusing on the ambitions of young women to become a member of the national parliament. We find that the appeal of becoming a parliamentarian for young women is significantly curtailed by beliefs that the institution maintains stereotypical gender norms as well as a masculine, and misogynistic, culture. Furthermore, we find that young women believe they lack the skills and confidence required to occupy public office which further diminishes their political ambition.

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Australian politics; gender and politics; political ambition; young people; Parliament of Australia; women and political leadership

## Introduction

Calls for greater representation of women in the Australian Parliament date back to the turn of the twentieth century. In 1890, Mary Lee, one of the first Australian suffragettes, argued that ‘it is an arbitrary and unjust Government which compels its support from those whose will in relation to it is never consulted’ (S.A. Register 14 April 1890, 5). In 1902, Australia became a world leader when women gained the power to vote and run for office at national elections. However, it took 40 years for the first women to enter parliament, and it was not until 2010 that Australia had its first female prime minister. Moreover, since federation, approximately 90 per cent of parliamentarians at state and federal levels throughout Australian history have been men (McCann and Wilson 2014).

Despite moves for change in the Parliament of Australia, which have included party-driven gender quotas and initiatives to advance women candidates, gender parity has yet to be achieved. After the 2022 federal election, the percentage of women in the House of

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Representatives, the chamber in which government is formed, was 38 per cent, while the percentage of women in the Senate was 57 per cent (IPU Parline 2022). At the time of writing, Australia was ranked 33rd in the world for the percentage of women in its national parliament (IPU Parline 2023). While this is an improvement over previous years, equal gender representation still has not been realised in the lower house.

This inequality is significant as the representation of women in politics is crucial to the health of a liberal democracy (UN General Assembly 2011). Rule by the many cannot be attained if women, constituting more than half of ‘the many’, are excluded from leadership positions. As such, a deficit of women in political decision-making constitutes a deficit of democracy (Tremblay 2007, 535). The representation of women in legislatures has significant implications for a political system as it shows that women are equal and included in society, while their absence suggests pervasive gendered prejudice and discrimination (Sawer 2002). Moreover, positive outcomes for the operation of a liberal democracy may be achieved by encouraging young women to run for parliament. As Alnemr, Ercan, and Vromen (2022) note, incorporating young people into institutional forms of politics can lead to positive policy outcomes and democratic inclusion. While some young women could refuse to participate in politics as ‘rejection of the hegemonic practices and politics’ (Taft 2006, 330), the visibility of women in politics may encourage other women, especially young women, to pursue political and leadership roles (Mariani, Marshall, and Mathews-Schultz 2015; Reingold and Harrell 2010; Wolbrecht and Campbell 2007; Wolbrecht and Campbell 2017). Women’s presence in parliament therefore has ripple effects far beyond the legislature itself.

Despite rising numbers of women elected to national legislatures around the world, the proportion of female parliamentarians has been considerably lower than men (see IPU Parline 2023). While the influence of parties, electoral systems, and candidate selection processes contribute to depressing the number of women elected to parliament (see Piscopo and Kenny 2020), political ambition also plays a significant role. In investigating the willingness of individuals to run for public office, Fox and Lawless (2005, 643) identified ‘nascent political ambition’ as ‘the embryonic or potential interest in office seeking that precedes the actual decision to enter a specific political contest’. Subsequent explorations of political ambitions have, for example, examined the motivations of women to stand for election in the United States of America (see Bernhard, Shames, and Langan Teele 2021; Lawless 2012), while others have examined the ambitions of those who are already members of youth wings of political parties (see Ammassari, McDonnell, and Valbruzzi 2022).

This paper contributes to our understanding about the continued underrepresentation of women in legislatures in liberal democracies by focusing on the political ambitions of young Australian women. In particular, the paper teases out the factors that young women identify as impacting their willingness to run for public office. Although the primary focus is on the preparedness of young women to be a member of parliament, we also present the thoughts of young men for comparison. The first section of the paper provides an overview of the literature concerning the normative assumptions that may discourage women from running for parliament. This is followed by an explanation of the methods used in this research. We then present our findings and discuss the factors that impact the political ambitions of young women in Australia and what may be done to address this in future.

## Politics, parliament, and gender

Gender stereotypes can impact the ambition of women to contest elections. Often, women are bound between two opposing social pressures, one which requires them to demonstrate traditional feminine characteristics, such as compassion and humility, and the other which requires stereotypically masculine traits to advance in politics (Jamieson 1995; Jansens 2019). Demonstrating stereotypical masculine traits results in men being more likely to be encouraged to pursue a political career than women (Fox and Lawless 2003; 2004; Lawless and Fox 2013). This contributes to women with political aspirations finding themselves caught in a so-called ‘double bind’ where they may face negative reactions if they demonstrate characteristics perceived to be either too feminine or too masculine (see Costa 2021; Teele, Kalla, and Rosenbluth 2018). This double bind is also reinforced and maintained through media coverage of women in politics (Jansens 2019; Sawyer 2012; Sorrentino, Augoustinos, and Le Couteur 2018).

These stereotypes impact the progression of potential female candidates in practice. In party preselection processes, for example, women may face hostility, bullying, and ‘sexist questioning’ (Galea and Chappell 2020, 1701). When they challenge this behaviour, they can be accused of ‘playing the gender card’ (Donaghue 2015). Furthermore, if elected, parliamentarians must spend substantial time away from home and often travel great distances from their local community to be in the nation’s parliament in Canberra. This means that women’s suitability for public office is often questioned during candidate selection processes due to their expected role as wives, mothers, and carers, while male candidates do not experience the same level of interrogation (see Crawford and Pini 2010; Galea and Chappell 2020; Rowe and Alver 2021; Sawyer 2013).

Parliament has also continually been characterised as failing to be family friendly. Its operation, and the expectation that parliamentarians be away from their families for long periods of time, can be a major factor that diminishes the ambition of women to contest elections (see Ghazarian and Laughland-Booÿ 2021, 118). Although the challenges of family and caring responsibilities also apply to men, they have a greater impact on women (Rowe and Alver 2021). The different demands that traditional gender roles attribute to men and women make it significantly harder for women to even think about entering parliament, much less to actually embark on such a course (McCulloch 2009).

Australian politics tends to privilege men who express their masculinity in traditional ways (Galea and Chappell 2020). This male-centric parliamentary culture has further negative impacts on women’s political ambition. Political institutions, including parliaments, are almost exclusively established by men, and women are still seen by some as interlopers in parliament (Erikson and Josefsson 2022). Even in the contemporary era, the Parliament of Australia continues to be seen as ‘a boys club’ (Smethurst 2021; Duncan and Baird 2021; Morrow 2022), while women may be presented ‘as a political novelty’ (Williams 2021, 184). Parliament is also seen to be a sexist and hostile environment for women to work in (Johnson and Williams 2021, 110). For example, the first female prime minister of Australia, Julia Gillard, was subjected to gendered slurs (Galea and Chappell 2020; Sawyer 2012). Although Gillard initially tended to ignore such behaviour, she eventually called out the sexism displayed towards her by Opposition Leader Tony Abbott in the now famous ‘misogyny speech’. But this came with its own dangers. Just as she expected, Gillard was accused of playing the gender card and

over-reacting (Donaghue 2015; Sorrentino, Augoustinos, and Le Couteur 2018). As she explained, '[y]ou hold yourself back from getting too angry, too animated, too passionate because you're fearful of being labelled as hysterical or shrill' (quoted in Williams 2019, 302).

The Australian media may also play a role in shaping young women's hesitancy to become parliamentarians (Jenkins 2006). The representation of female leaders in the media typically involves criticism of women's appearance, sexuality, fashion choices, relationships, and marital status (Donaghue 2015; Hall and Donaghue 2013; Jansens 2019; McCulloch 2009; Sorrentino, Augoustinos, and Le Couteur 2018). Throughout Gillard's term, the media disproportionately focused on her appearance and alluded to her behaviour as being unfeminine (Jansens 2019). The coverage of female politicians has seemingly not changed much post-Gillard. For example, in 2020 Nicole Flint, the MP for Boothby, called out what she labelled 'sexist rubbish' on the part of media reports that were focused on her clothing and appearance (Norman 2020).

Irrespective of achievements and qualifications, women are also more likely to question their own suitability to participate in politics (Fox and Lawless 2004, 275). As Ondercin and Jones-White (2011, 690) argued, women will 'hold themselves to a higher standard before running for elected office' compared to men who are less likely to undertake the same self-critique. Women are also more likely to believe they must demonstrate extraordinarily high skills to be ready to contest an election (Ondercin and Jones-White 2011, 690). Furthermore, women often perceive themselves, and other women, as having less political knowledge than men (Morehouse Mendez and Osborn 2010). Accordingly, women have greater doubts about their preparedness to stand for election, which affects their political ambition irrespective of actual professional achievements and qualifications (Lawless and Fox 2008). The issue of confidence is linked to established trends in social psychology which show that men possess greater confidence in their own abilities compared to women (Buser et al. 2020).

In recent years the treatment of women in parliament has become a prominent issue in the public debate. Female MPs have spoken out against bullying and sexist behaviour in parliament (see Australian Human Rights Commission 2021; Haydar 2022), while in 2020 allegations of sexual assault and harassment of women shone the spotlight on parliament as a workplace. A report commissioned after these allegations were aired by the Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Kate Jenkins, found that 77 per cent of employees in the Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplace had 'either experienced, witnessed or heard about bullying, sexual harassment and/or actual or attempted sexual assault' in their workplace, while 40 per cent of women employees had personally experienced sexual harassment (Australian Human Rights Commission 2021, 108). These revelations highlight how toxic masculinity is prevalent in the parliamentary workplace and how it may diminish the political ambitions of women.

## Context to the present study

At the 2022 Australian election the Coalition, led by Prime Minister Scott Morrison, sought to win its fourth consecutive term in government. At this time misogyny and gender-based violence were particularly prominent issues. In early 2021, a ministerial staffer, Brittany Higgins, alleged that she had been raped in Parliament House by a

colleague. The prime minister's handling of the matter attracted criticism and led some to argue that women had become a 'weak spot' for Morrison (Remeikis 2021). Around the same time, historical rape allegations were made against the Attorney General, Christian Porter (McGowan 2021), and a former Liberal Member of Parliament, Julia Banks, described the alleged sexual harassment and misogyny she experienced in politics (Macmillan 2021). It was within this context that the interviews were conducted with our participants.

## Data and methods

This paper presents data from young Australians who were interviewed as part of the 'Social Futures and Life Pathways of Young People in Queensland' project. Also known as 'Our Lives', this is a longitudinal research project that began in 2006. Since that time, data has been gathered from a single age cohort of young people from the state of Queensland in Australia. In 2006, the cohort were 12–13 years old. There have since been eight waves of quantitative data collection, with the most recent occurring in 2021 (N = 1,663). In addition, qualitative data is gathered by way of regular interviews with selected participants (see Our Lives 2023). This provides a sample of young people who can provide rich data for research. Like previous qualitative data gathering rounds prior to federal elections since 2013, politics was a topic of focus. Table 1 presents the details of our participants, with pseudonyms used to protect their identities.

In 2022, the cohort was 28–29 years old and would be participating in their fourth federal election in Australia's system of compulsory voting. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 47 members of the Our Lives cohort in the weeks prior to the May 2022 election. As Table 1 shows, 27 of our participants were female and 20 were male. For 39 of our participants, the highest level of education attained was a bachelor's degree. Four participants had obtained a postgraduate degree, eight had achieved a vocational qualification, while five had no post-school qualifications.

Our interviews each took approximately 60 min and were conducted by phone or videoconferencing. The interviews focused on participants' views on Australian politics and the federal election as well as their thoughts on gender in Australian politics, particularly women's representation. The interviews also explored the ambitions of young people to be active in Australian politics. The interviews were recorded and transcribed before being analysed using NVivo, a software program for qualitative data analysis.

Initially, a thematic analysis of the data was conducted. As Herzog, Handke, and Hitters (2019, 385) remind us, thematic analysis is a core principle of qualitative research and is an effective method to examine the 'experiences, perceptions and understandings' of individuals. Furthermore, an inductive approach was utilised to help identify the perspectives of our participants. The inductive approach is valuable in constructing conceptual frameworks to understand observed phenomena (Pierce 2008,32). These approaches were most appropriate to assist our aim of understanding the ambitions of our female participants to run for parliament. The data coding process drew out themes from our participants' views on the role of women in politics, as well as the broader Australian political culture. It also focused on the willingness of individual participants to run as candidates at a national election.

The combination of the perspectives of men and women was important for our study. While our focus is primarily on the willingness of our female participants to be a member of parliament, our male participants provided a source of comparison. Insights may be

**Table 1.** Individual characteristics of participants.

Pseudonym	Gender	Highest education completed since High School
Lachlan	Male	Bachelor's
Jeremiah	Male	Bachelor's
Maria	Female	Bachelor's
Rami	Male	Bachelor's
Michael	Male	Bachelor's
Jean	Female	Bachelor's
Abdul	Male	Bachelor's
Tania	Female	Bachelor's
Jayden	Male	Bachelor's
Carlos	Male	Bachelor's
Elena	Female	Bachelor's
Benji	Male	Postgraduate
Olga	Female	Bachelor's
Henry	Male	Bachelor's
Fatima	Female	Bachelor's
Maya	Female	Vocational
Victor	Male	Bachelor's
Sandra	Female	Bachelor's
Jemima	Female	Bachelor's
Ellie	Female	Bachelor's
Linda	Female	Bachelor's
Miguel	Male	Bachelor's
Irene	Female	Bachelor's
Esther	Female	Vocational
Diana	Female	Bachelor's
Vanessa	Female	Bachelor's
Nancy	Female	No post-school qualification
Patrick	Male	Postgraduate
Emika	Female	Bachelor's
Lucas	Male	Bachelor's
Grace	Female	Bachelor's
Mariam	Female	Bachelor's
Oliver	Male	No post-school qualification
Brian	Male	No post-school qualification
Melody	Female	Vocational
Tia	Female	Bachelor's
Claudia	Female	Bachelor's
Jennifer	Female	Bachelor's
Jose	Male	Vocational
Brandon	Male	Vocational
Theo	Male	Vocational
Eve	Female	No post-school qualification
Monica	Female	Vocational
Hugo	Male	No post-school qualification
Rose	Female	Vocational
Victoria	Female	Postgraduate
Cooper	Male	Postgraduate

gleaned from whether the women in our study are more or less likely than men to have ambitions to enter parliament. This contrast is particularly important as calls are made for men to become aware of, and respond to, barriers to women's participation in work and public life (see Drury and Kaiser 2014).

## Findings

### *Gender roles*

The consensus among our participants was that gender roles continued to negatively impact the ambition of women to run for parliament in Australia. Female participants

were more likely than men to see the demanding lifestyle of a parliamentarian and the travel and time commitment as significant obstacles. These findings align with those of Fox and Lawless (2003) and Rowe and Alver (2021) who highlight how family demands and expectations shape women's decision to enter politics. A typical response from our participants was provided by Vanessa who said that running for parliament would not be 'great for a work-life balance'. Similarly, Linda, in reflecting on why she would not consider running for parliament, said '... it was probably more the lifestyle ... that turned me off, because I was one that wanted to get married, have a family, stay at home'. She argued that gender roles were perpetuated by debates in the public sphere, where women were subjected to questions like 'where's your family? Where are your children? Are they [women] playing ... that maternal role as well as they should be?'. These views reflect challenges discussed by many former federal parliamentarians, required to be away from home for approximately 20 weeks a year (see Stone 2021).

Tania attributed gender stereotypes to 'old school thinking' where the expectation was that 'women do admin roles, men have leadership roles'. As Victoria observed, 'there's an unconscious bias to go towards the man in the suit rather than the woman in the dress based on what we perceive to look professional'. These beliefs align with conceptual insights about how gender impacts the advancement of candidates in politics (Schneider and Bos 2019), as well as findings from studies on the impact that stereotypical views have on women taking leadership positions (Dolan 2014).

While women felt their gender was incompatible with a parliamentary career, men we spoke with did not identify this as a significant issue. None of our male participants made a statement about the potential negative impact on their lifestyle if they engaged in political work. In contrast, women pointed to traditional gender roles for either their own personal reticence to consider a political career, or the barriers they had observed women facing in Australian parliaments. In presenting a summary of this view, Eve argued that even in contemporary liberal democracies, there is an ingrained assumption that 'men are politicians, not women'.

Several participants identified politics as a 'male sport', where traditionally feminine qualities were undervalued and seen as a liability, alluding to the 'double bind' women face in public office (see Costa 2021). As Fatima explained:

'Politics are dirty. So I think that you have to have a thicker skin to be in politics ... That's a very sexist thing of me to say. But women would get hurt more than men ... just through ... how they're brought up, men are thicker skinned and women are not. So, I think that kind of stops women from being in politics ...'

Almost universally, participants criticised the impact of traditional gender roles on women in politics. The lone exception was Rose, who thought there were too many women in politics. 'I don't think women make very good leaders,' she explained, and reflected that 'I've had women bosses and they've always just been not great. They put their emotion in it too much, where a male can be a natural leader. It's just how they're driven.' Rose noted, however, that 'I know a lot of people don't agree with that.'

### ***Political knowledge and self-exclusion***

Political knowledge, which includes an understanding about the structures, operation, and major issues in a polity (Ghazarian et al. 2020), enhances the capacity of individuals



to participate effectively in democratic politics (see Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Kleinberg and Lau 2019; Laughland-Booÿ, Skrbiš, and Ghazarian 2018). However, women often have less confidence in their capacity to run for public office (see Dahl and Nyrup 2021; Dassonneville and McAllister 2018; Elder 2004). While both male and female participants referred to their personal characteristics as a reason to not enter politics, women had stronger beliefs than men that they did not have the necessary skills or knowledge to make an effective contribution which, in turn, depressed their political ambition. These views support previous findings that women often grow up feeling they do not possess the requisite characteristics to be a politician (Lawless and Pearson 2008).

Responses from some of our female participants to questions about whether they would consider a political career referred to personal ability. Mariam remarked, 'I don't think that I am well-spoken enough or educated enough on all of the issues to assist and navigate through such unprecedented waters ... I don't feel that I have the confidence nor the mental capacity to deal with what they [politicians] do'. Similarly, Irene commented that she would not consider going into politics because '... being a politician is the art of having ... solid arguments and ... I'm not the most eloquent at times'. This lack of confidence among women about their skills and knowledge has been observed in the broader workforce, and often thwarts the career progression of women (Carlin et al. 2018). This issue is even more pronounced in politics as women tend to believe they must meet higher standards prior to standing for public office (Ondercin and Jones-White 2011, 690).

Questioning one's preparedness to run for office was not exclusive to women, as some male participants also expressed concerns about their capacity to embark on a political career. The self-reflection undertaken by many male participants, however, had a different emphasis. This was typified by Brandon's response, who described himself 'as a reasonably honest person' and felt that 'it'd be hard to be an honest man in politics'. Patrick similarly thought that his capacity for 'caring and vulnerability' would mean that he would 'crack the ship too quickly'. Two other male participants, Lachlan and Rami, both said that they would be against entering a political life because they did not want to compromise personal values.

Unlike women we spoke to, whose political ambitions waned because they felt they did not have the necessary skills to be a parliamentarian, men were shunning politics because they were concerned about maintaining their existing skills and integrity. This phenomenon reflects established trends that show men tend to be overconfident of their own capacity compared to women (Buser et al. 2020; Fox and Lawless 2014). It also reminds us how a lack of confidence about one's capacity to be an effective political actor particularly impacts the political ambition of Australian women.

### ***Parliamentary culture***

In Australia, parliament has been dominated by men who have often flaunted aggressive and confrontational traits. Such behaviour is ostensibly linked to ideas that displaying feminine qualities would be counterproductive to one's career progression in politics (see Jansens 2019). As Collier and Raney (2018) remind us, these ideas constitute major barriers for women in politics.



Our participants cited a variety of reasons for their hesitation to pursue a political career, but the most common explanation, regardless of gender, stemmed from their perception of a toxic culture in politics. Participants almost universally saw the federal parliament in a negative light. Their criticisms were influenced by news coverage of alleged sexual harassment and abuse in the parliamentary workplace. Participants believed that toxic masculinity was contributing to a general lack of respect for others, including aggressive and immature behaviour that they found repugnant.

### ***Theatrics and bullying***

Participants were highly critical of politicians' actions which they described as 'bullying' and 'juvenile'. As Theo put it, 'what goes on behind closed doors and all the information that gets leaked from their culture, I believe it's absolutely disgusting'. Rami was critical of the 'raucous' performances during Question Time and queried how this impacted the overall operation of parliament and government by stating that 'I don't know how that leads into other aspects of the workplace ...'.

Others criticised the performance of parliamentarians and explained how this suppressed their nascent political ambition. Female participants felt that an apparent culture of bullying disproportionately impacted women. As Irene argued, 'female politicians certainly aren't taken as seriously or are belittled for the smallest of things that wouldn't even be worth a mention for male politicians.' Providing a personal perspective, Gemma said that 'there's absolutely no way I would be comfortable going into politics as a female, in the way that I certainly wouldn't be worried about if I was a man.' Although she acknowledged that politics was a 'tough gig' all round, she thought that women 'suffer in a different way to men'. Our participants' observations concur with established research on Australian parliamentary culture. Collier and Raney (2018), for example, note that shouting, belittling, taunting, bullying, and sexism are not only permitted, but encouraged, in parliament, and are linked to an adversarial political style. However, these same characteristics were depressing the political ambitions of young people we spoke to, especially women.

### ***Masculinity and femininity***

Our participants were highly critical of gender issues in parliament, including allegations of sexual harassment and abuse. Many participants labelled parliament as a 'boys' club', mirroring evidence that women may tend to believe that they are not welcome in politics as a male-dominated field (Liu 2019). Maya observed that 'women have really got to stand up and jump up and down and make some noise to be heard ...', while Sandra suggested that 'women in those positions feel like they have to try to compete' with the boys' club mentality. Going further, Diana explained: '... for some reason femininity is a flaw. And to be successful or respected, you have to brush off that femininity and become quite a masculine, brash, brutish person ...'.

The pressure upon politicians to 'perform' a delineated brand of masculinity is well-noted in existing research (Johnson 2015). Our participants' reflections echo established literature on the Australian Parliament as a highly gendered, sexist, and stereotypically 'masculine' workplace (Crawford and Pini 2011; Johnson and Williams 2021). Patrick,

who identified as being a man who ‘has spent my life trying to not be a toxically masculine man’ and ‘wants to lead people around me through vulnerability and respect’, said he had no interest in becoming a politician ‘because that’s not ... what they currently stand for’. This highlights how an emphasis on traditional and aggressive forms of masculinity is negatively impacting the political ambitions of young people.

### ***Sexual assault, harassment, and safety***

Participants were deeply concerned about how safe the national parliamentary workplace was, particularly for women. Many participants were disgusted and upset about recent allegations of sexual misconduct in parliament. For example, Tia said that she had ‘stopped reading into it because ... it was just too horrifying’. Some participants felt that even more disturbing behaviours were being kept from public scrutiny. Rose argued ‘I know that women can get harassed ... and they shan’t say anything because they’re in parliament.’ Patrick summarised the feelings of our participants: ‘I think it’s [parliament] fraught with sexual harassment and ... toxic masculinity. The view is, ‘You do what I say, when I say it, and that’s your job,’ and it lacks basic respect ...’.

Many participants referred to Brittany Higgins, a former political staffer who alleged she had been raped by a colleague in Parliament House (see Murphy 2021). In many participants’ minds, this event constituted the utmost evidence that parliament was unsafe for women. Several participants explicitly thought that this would prevent women from entering politics. Brandon said:

‘... there’s been a lot of misogyny and the sex scandals and bullying of female MP’s ... obviously that’s unacceptable and that probably is a barrier for some women and probably discourages them from taking some of those higher positions.’

Tia was unequivocal in her perspective as a young woman:

‘If you’re not safe in your workplace, screw working there. I wouldn’t do that either. That’s terrifying to think that you have to go to work and that’s what you’re walking into. Like, this boys’ club is just a joke.’

It was on these matters of sexual assault and harassment that most concerned our participants and had a significant impact on their political ambition. This was unsurprising given the high-profile coverage of stories like Brittany Higgins’ and the Jenkins Report findings of widespread bullying, sexual harassment, and sexual assault (Australian Human Rights Commission 2021). The overall sentiment gleaned from the interviews was summed up well in the conclusions offered by Irene who said definitively, ‘I would not want myself or ... any female people that I knew to be in parliament, working in parliament at all.’

### **Discussion**

This study allows us to crystallise three key factors that impact young women’s political ambition. First, the consensus among our participants was that gender roles continue to impact the willingness of young women to run for parliament. Participants discussed how family or relationships could thwart the political ambitions of women, and that existing social norms meant that they were expected to perform caring and nurturing

roles within families, rather than be active in the political sphere. Additionally, they felt that it would be too difficult for women to balance their family responsibilities with parliamentary duties, which often meant that politics was an activity better suited to males.

While there are theoretically no constitutional constraints on women's participation in Australian politics (Ghazarian and Laughland-Booÿ 2021), the fact is that gender-based inequality of opportunity is diminishing the political ambition of young women. Social constraints continue to impact the willingness of women to pursue a parliamentary career in Australia. These must be addressed if gender parity is to be achieved in the national parliament. It is therefore critical that Australia engages in a national conversation about the importance of gender representation in parliament and the mechanisms that contribute to entrenched gender disparity. This would provide opportunities to tackle long held assumptions, prejudice, and discrimination. It is also important to ensure that girls and young women are given every opportunity to develop their skills in leadership and are encouraged to identify, value, and build their political capabilities and ambitions. This must be done through targeted advocacy projects that empower young people, particularly women, to engage with, and participate in, politics from an early age.

Second, we discovered that the political ambition of Australian women was impacted by their own perceived lack of ability. Women participants were more likely to doubt their ability to participate in politics than men. These findings highlight the importance of bolstering the political confidence of young women. This could be achieved through targeted school-based education programs. While the Australian Curriculum, which is available to all schools, aims to enable young people to be 'active and informed citizens' (ACARA 2022), there is a clear need to strengthen elements concerning active citizenship. In particular, a key area of focus must be empowering women to foster their ambitions to stand for election to the national parliament.

Third, disgust in the performance of parliamentarians and the tone of political debate in contemporary Australian politics was also depressing the political ambition of young women. Allegations of sexual assault and misogyny had a negative impact on participants' views of the national parliament and they characterised it as an unwelcoming and hostile environment. Women, in particular, were concerned about safety in the parliamentary workplace. This points to an urgent need to revise existing perceived norms of parliamentary behaviour if it is to be seen as an institution that values diversity and encourages participation by all members of the community. Changing behaviour expectations, and enhancing opportunities for greater scrutiny of parliamentary conduct, have been flagged as potential ways in which these challenges may be overcome (see Rodrigues 2010). The voices of our young Australians suggest that these measures are well overdue.

Our participants were critical of the status quo, and agreed that existing challenges were significant. We did, however, detect a concerning degree of acquiescence about the situation. We observed reluctance by our participants to stand up to, and tackle, the issues from within. Instead, they preferred to avoid such a toxic environment. This highlights a deeply unhealthy element in Australian politics whereby individuals, especially women, were choosing not to participate in democratic processes. It is critical that greater efforts be made to advance the political ambitions of women to stand for election to the Australian Parliament. This may be done through building the confidence and opportunities for women to participate, while changing broader attitudes to the role of

women in politics. Without advancing in these areas, women's political underrepresentation and an exclusionary masculine culture will continue to mar young people's political ambitions and the practical operation of Australia's liberal democracy.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

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