

International Women's Day Breakfast 2007

in this Election Year!

8th March 2007



"Many women do not recognize themselves as discriminated against; no better proof could be found of the totality of their conditioning."

Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*

How well does Australian democracy serve women? (2007)

Australia's performance in promoting substantive gender equality has been in steady decline over at least the last ten years. Despite its one-time status as a world leader in this regard, at present Australia's democracy does not seem to be serving Australian women well...

Executive Officer, Susie Reid, address the breakfast, here is her speech...

Why are we here together to celebrate International Women's Day?

Some of us would remember 1972, and hearing Helen Reddy on the radio singing, 'I am woman, hear me roar'. In 2007, there's a chorus of 'I'm not a feminist'. Some say feminism is passé because it worked. They argue that young women are free and independent and happy and there's no need for them to even think about feminism.

Or could it be because they are, indeed, young, and haven't yet faced the limitations on career and finance that occur to women much more than men after having children? Or because they are privileged in terms of class and have the benefits that come from independent money and a tertiary education? Or because they have grown up in functional, nurturing families and are not subject to abuse from the partner they love? Or because they haven't had to go to court in their own rape case? Or because they haven't yet had the discussion with their brother about who will look after an ageing parent?



In 2007, intelligent young women speak about being 'post- feminists' as if the need for feminism is over. Well, "I'll be post-feminist in a post-patriarchal world" (as nicely said in postcard above Kylie's desk).

Because, in 2007, we see the idealised female body size so emaciated that models have died and international governments have moved to legislate for a minimum Body Mass Index to protect the health of models. Anorexia is the third most common chronic illness for girls and young women in Australia.

In 2007, globally recognised women are famous for an Internet porn video (Paris Hilton), for enormous breasts (Pamela Anderson); for marrying into money (Anna Nicole Smith); and for conspicuous consumption and marrying a Danish Prince (Princess Mary)! In 2007, elite athletes sooner or later turn up on the cover of *Ralph* magazine, and in 2007, a new market has emerged with provocative lingerie for pre-teenage girls – G-strings and padded bra's for the under 10s.

So why celebrate International Women's Day? On this day, we do three things:
we look back to the **achievements won** by women through decades of struggle;
we look around with eyes wide open and **maintain our rage**; and
we **look forward to equality and justice** for women.

Looking back, we see extraordinary (yet ordinary) women who won so many rights for women from the fundamental to the sublime - the vote; equal pay; the right to paid work after marriage; (limited) maternity leave and childcare; the (limited) right to abortion; the right to divorce; to own property; to have custody of children; to government support while raising children; access to refuges; protection under the law from rape in marriage; access to universities; access to bank loans; access to the members area at sporting events!

Despite this, we don't have the same rights and privileges of men.

And some of the ground that has been gained over a century has indeed been lost in the last decade. (*see [handout flyer](#) and actual cuts of women's services as detailed in our previous flyer for the Anne Summers forum – back page, ['Ripped off'](#).*)

Violence against women is entrenched and endemic in our Australian society, where one in three women has been sexually abused as a child, one in four experiences violence against her in her own home, and where 57% of Australian women state they have experienced at least one incidence of physical or sexual violence in their lifetime¹. The secrecy that surrounds violence against women lends a veneer of respectability to our society that it does not deserve.

Women in other countries face violence and discrimination that is obscene and inescapable.

In 2000, the birth ratio in China stood at 117 males per 100 females as a result of genocide of female babies in past decades. In Iraq, since the US-led invasion in 2003, thousands of women have been killed and raped, fewer are attending schools and universities and pressure to wear the veil is being applied once more under conservative Shia rule. In Iran, a 16 year old girl was publicly hanged for crimes against chastity, while the man who sexually abused her still lives². In Papua New Guinea, gender-based violence in the home and the community is pervasive. Women cannot move freely, use public transport or access health or education because of the fear of sexual violence, exacerbated by high rates of HIV/AIDS³. The list could go on and on.

Even on International Women's Day, women in Australia and around the world will suffer rape, violence and discrimination.

The scripts for how to live as a woman, and how to live as a man need to be rewritten so children can grow up with positive messages about being who they are.

Whoever they are.

For a start, boys can be taught about equality and respect and human rights in a civilised society. Girls can be taught to be independent and to expect equal and just treatment. And they can refuse to settle for anything less.

1 <http://www.aifs.gov.au/acssa/statistics.html> International Violence Against Women Survey: the Australian component 2003

2 Four Corners 8.8.2006

3 <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGASA340022006>