

Women in the 21st Century

International Women's Day Breakfast 2007 in this Election Year!

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.

A highly conservative federal government led by Prime Minister John Howard, has now been in office for over a decade. Through initiatives such as the family tax system (particularly Family Tax Benefit (FTB) Part B, which is only paid to single-income families), Prime Minister Howard has made his support for the breadwinner model clear. The many changes he has made to other areas of government concerned with achieving gender equality, particularly his attempts to amend the federal Sex Discrimination Act, his downgrading of the women' machinery of government and the defunding of the majority of women' non-government organisations have underscored his resistance.

In light of this hostility, the other jurisdictions of Australia's federal system have taken on a renewed significance in the struggle to achieve gender equality ... Given that the States and Territories are partly or wholly responsible for the delivery of many of the policies and programs that most impact on women's daily lives this situation highlights the potential for discrepancies in gender equality across the country ...

The other element of the political context that should be mentioned here is the Australian women' women's movement. Like other liberal democracies, Australia did not suddenly decide to embrace gender equality as an important goal because it seemed like a good idea. Successive Australian governments have been persuaded of the importance of achieving greater equality between women and men by feminist activists both inside and outside government. The women's movement has theorised, strategised, rallied and lobbied in an effort to influence the direction of government towards gender equality. Feminists have drawn on international human rights obligations and standards to exercise influence. They have shamed governments through revelations of the continuing levels of exploitation and oppression that women experience through violence, unequal pay and in other areas of continued discrimination. In periods where the women's movement has been highly visible and mobilised they have achieved great change.

In the inevitable periods of movement abeyance, however there have been many missed opportunities. Without continual pressure from feminist activists governments have time and again revealed their resistance to the goal of gender equality and, without continued pressure and scrutiny, have wound back achievements in many areas.”

... Through [Australia's] **refusal to become a signatory** to the UN's Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and the Prime Minister's ongoing **efforts to undermine and diminish our federal sex discrimination laws**, women's rights in Australia have been 'diluted not strengthened' under the Howard government ...

FAILURES in Legislative Frameworks

- The Australian legislative framework is not as comprehensive, coordinated or effective as it might be. There are inconsistent sets of legislation at the national and sub-national levels and poor coordination across jurisdictions.
- There is no constitutional or legislative recognition of equality between women and men (e.g. a national bill of rights).
- Federal sex discrimination legislation was enacted relatively late, and is only partially adequate in meeting international obligations.
- The bodies charged with implementing anti-discrimination and equal employment opportunity legislation have been weakened.
- Pay equity has not been achieved and women working full time are paid almost 15 per cent less than their male colleagues.
- Australia maintains reservations to article 11 of CEDAW, has refused to ratify ILO C183 (the maternity protection convention) and is one of only two OECD countries without paid maternity leave.
- The CEDAW Committee has expressed dissatisfaction over the erosion of women's policy machinery and Australia's retreat from international leadership on gender equity issues.
- Australia has refused to ratify the Optional Protocol to CEDAW and there is poor awareness and understanding of CEDAW at State and Territory level.

FAILURES in Policy machinery

- Levels of political commitment to women's policy machinery have varied over time and across jurisdictions. Recent years have seen its erosion at the federal level and in most States and Territories.
- Specifically, in 2004, the federal Office for the Status of Women was relocated from the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet to the Department of Family and Community Services and renamed the Office for Women.
- The dismantling of the policy machinery has also brought about the virtual elimination of gender analysis expertise from the bureaucracy in several jurisdictions, most notably at the federal level.
- Concern over the decline in women's policy machinery was noted by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in 2006.

FAILURES in Representation

- The major parties still do not preselect women in equal numbers to men. Women were only 28.6 per cent of nominations in the 2004 federal election.
- As of January 2007, women comprise only 13 per cent of federal government ministers (4 out of 30) and 11 per cent of Cabinet ministers (2 out of 18).
- Contrary to widespread belief, the percentage of women councillors in local government is lower than in either national or State parliaments with the average across Australian local governments being 27.8 per cent.
- Women remain concentrated in the lower levels of the Australian Public Service, and in particular are under-represented in the senior management and leadership group, the Senior Executive Service (SES).
- Women remain significantly under-represented in the Australian judiciary.
- The representation of women in the higher echelons of the private sector is extremely low—just 8.6 per cent of board director in the top 200 ASX companies. Progress in this area is notoriously slow, with negligible improvement in recent years.

FAILURES in Consulting with women's NGOs

- The increasing dominance of the public choice paradigm in the federal policy sphere has contributed to the increasing exclusion of women's NGOs from important and relevant policy debates.
- Under new arrangements for NGO funding, the federal government now provides operational funding for only four 'secretariats'. The secretariats have had little or no public profile in policy debates.
- As a result of the changed arrangements many groups of women have little or no representation in women's policy debates. Under-represented groups include Aboriginal women, women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, women with disabilities, refugee women, and lesbians.
- Since 2003 there has been no national policy consultation process with women's NGOs.
- Some States and Territories remain committed to regular and formal consultation with women's NGOs and maintain grants programs to support their work. Other jurisdictions, however, have abolished all formal consultation processes and fund only a tokenistic grants program or no grants program at all.

The information on these two pages are from a 2007 publication (just released) entitled, *How well does Australian democracy serve women?* Written by Sarah Maddison and Emma Partridge for the Democratic Audit of Australia, Australian National University.

An online version of this publication can be found by going to the Democratic Audit of Australia website: <http://democratic.audit.anu.edu.au/>

Why celebrate IWD IN 2007?

In 1972 Helen Reddy sang, '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!**

Prepare your
daughter
for working life.

Give her
less pocket money
than your son.

Equal pay is a family issue. www.eoc.vic.gov.au



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 (www.garvan.org.au). 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**.

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 recent years.

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.

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

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 2005, 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.

A GLANCE AT A CENTURY OF STRUGGLE

International Women's Day (IWD) is celebrated on March 8th by women all over the world. It is designated by many countries as a public holiday and is officially recognised by the United Nations.

An international history

In the first decade of the 1900s, women in England, the United States and Europe were demanding equal rights, focussing on the right to vote and equal employment conditions.

In 1909, on the 28th February, the first National Women's Day was declared by the Socialist Party of America.

In 1910, the Second International Conference of Socialist Women was held in Copenhagen. It was attended by more than 100 women from 17 countries. It resolved unanimously to nominate a day each year to honour the women's rights movement and to work towards universal suffrage (the vote) for all women. No date was selected.

The first IWD was held on 19 March 1911 in Germany, Austria, Denmark and Switzerland, where demonstrations for equal political and employment rights were held. More than a million people participated. This date was chosen by German women because, on the same date in 1848, the King of Prussia had promised votes for women among other reforms. The promise was made in the face of an armed uprising, and remained unfulfilled.

In that same week, more than 145 girls were killed in the notorious Triangle Fire in New York. The fire broke out in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory where young women were employed as seamstresses. Most were teenagers and were Jewish and Italian immigrants. Many jumped to their deaths from their 9th floor workplace rather than stay to be burned in the fire.

This was a shocking event and became the catalyst for changing labour legislation in the US and a focus for women's protests in subsequent years.

Women in Russia celebrated IWD for the first time on the last Sunday in February 1913. It was part of the peace movement and protested against the move towards war. In 1917, after two million deaths because of the war, Russian women again chose the last Sunday in February to strike 'for bread and peace'. The women did this despite opposition from political leaders. The Czar was forced to abdicate four days later. The women won the right to vote from the new provisional government. Although Russia was using the Julian calendar at the time, using the Gregorian calendar in use elsewhere, it was March 8th. This had been the date IWD was celebrated in Europe since 1913, and the date used in most countries around the world now.

The Suffragettes in England adopted the colours of Green, White and Purple for their campaign to win the vote for women. White is for purity; purple for dignity, self-reverence and respect; and green for hope and new life. We use these colours still to symbolise women's struggle for equal rights.

In Australia

In Australia, the first unofficial IWD was organised by the Militant Women's Movement on March 25th, 1928 in Sydney. It demonstrated for equal pay and improved working conditions. IWD was held through the decades until it was officially recognised by the Australian federal government in March 1974. Prime Minister Gough Whitlam used the day to announce Australia's participation in the United Nations' International Women's Year for 1975.

References: <http://www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/women/womday97.htm>
www.isis.aust.com/iwd/stevens
http://www.peacewomen.org/news/Iraq/Dec06/violence_escalates.html

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² Four Corners 8.8.2006

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