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Gender equality

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Old habits die hard. The patriarchal edifice of the late 19th century has been sandblasted and become vastly more civilised. But the 'internal' structural arrangements and cultural fittings that advantage men at the expense of women have not yet been satisfactorily redesigned.

Destination equality!

Mary Crooks

Gender equality's great promise is that it benefits all people, children, life partners, workplaces, our economy and democratic culture.

This is a story of Australia's progress on gender equality from the mid 19th century to today. There is much cause for hope in what has been achieved. But there is a fragility or brittleness attached to this scorecard, underlining our need to do much more — with renewed hope, energy and urgency.

* * *

She heard murmurs of a destination of great promise. Life was tough and unforgiving for her and the women around her. She yearned for a break from the drudgery, the relentless care of her large brood and the endless nights, by dim light, doing piece-work for a pittance. She privately thrilled at the idea of a breakaway journey, although others thought it unthinkable and frivolous. Undeterred, she began to organise the trip.

* * *

A false start

The early planning got off to a false start.

It was 1864. Miraculously, it appeared that Victorian women had won the right to vote. News reports came through of a novel sight at a polling booth in a municipal election held in the district of Castlemaine:

> A coach filled with ladies drove up, and the fair occupants alighted and recorded their votes to a man, for a bachelor candidate – Mr Zeal.[1]

Rather than this being an historic step for gender equality, however, it was a shocking blunder, caused when the existing municipal roll — which had enabled property-owning women to vote — was transferred to the colonial roll. When the men in the colonial legislature realised that the right to vote for some women in municipal elections had automatically carried over, a scramble ensued and amending legislation was quickly passed.[2]

The prospect of women being able to elect people to exalted forums such as a state parliament threatened the social order in which men held the power. Speaking in support of the amending legislation, the Member for the country seat of Kilmore and former premier John O'Shannassy insisted that it was unwise to mix up males and females in politics:

> A woman had her household duties to attend to, and when she discharged her duties faithfully as a wife and a mother she did that which became her best; and the best they (the parliament) could do for her was to leave her to the performance of those duties. He did not want to go back into history to prove that woman's interference in political matters was injurious.[3]

Less restrained was the future premier and Member for the inner suburban seat of Collingwood, Mr Graham Berry. The principle of a woman voting was:

> … an unmitigated evil. It was generally the worst class of females who had voted, and he might also add that it was generally the worst class of the other sex who brought them up to vote.[4]

This debate reflected a patriarchal world view transplanted from Europe and now being fashioned in the colonies, at the

same time as banishing Aboriginal clans and communities to the margins. Core beliefs and practices privileged men and guaranteed them superior roles in politics, economic production and exchange; upholding their power over others through written and unwritten rules that regulated conformity, punishment and reward; and affirming their cultural dominance insofar as gendered roles and expectations. This was the 'natural' order of things from which there should be no departure.

Women's place in the 19th century

The terrifying prospect of women having a vote in 19th-century Australia was a direct challenge to their authority and leadership. They were, after all, the legislators, judges, captains of industry, army generals, naval commanders, explorers and religious leaders. This patriarchal world unequivocally deemed women as subordinate, the 'other'. They were expected to be wives and mothers, economically dependent and with no political rights.

Not surprisingly, conditions for women in the main were oppressive. Marriage for many was a regime of unspoken tyranny.[5] Men could will their property away from their wives, leaving them destitute. They could desert the marriage free of any responsibility for their wives or children. A man could nominate a guardian for his children other than the mother. Women had no custody rights at all.

On marrying, an heiress forfeited her property to her husband, as well as being unable to bequeath it.[6] Divorce law was discriminatory: men only had to prove their wives had been unfaithful once to successfully divorce, whereas women had to prove their husbands' repeated adultery, cruelty or desertion.[7] Australia's long, dark history of family violence was at least as widespread as it is now, though with less legal recourse or material support.

Few contraception options existed, the very idea meeting with male opprobrium. The average number of live births per married woman was seven and maternal mortality was high. Repeated childbearing left many women with debilitating injuries and long-term ill-health.[8] Judged responsible for all child rearing, women contended with the added burdens of child deaths, poverty, hardship and diseases (such as typhoid) caused by overcrowded slums and poor sanitation.

Many women endured sexual assault and other violence in their homes. Reflecting long-established English law, a husband was immune from the charge of rape within marriage.

There was little in the way of maternal or child health support for mothers. Widows and deserted wives lacked any government assistance.[9] Women could not make a will, enter a contract, or sue.[10] Despite substantial colonial wealth and prosperity, women enjoyed little economic security. They were barred from higher education and were ineligible for the public service. Following the rules and practices of the English courts, they were deemed neither competent nor eligible for jury service.

Occupationally, women were largely restricted to being governesses or teachers or to working in oppressive factories for wages that could be as low as one-third of a male wage. Large numbers of women not supported by men had to survive as best they could, toiling for poor pay in poor conditions.[11]

This exploitative situation (for children also) was further compounded by resistance from male unionists to female membership. Women were forced, in 1882, to form Australia's first female trade union, The Tailoresses' Association, which took successful strike action months later.

The Suffrage Movement

Some thirty years after the 1864 'close shave' with female suffrage in Castlemaine, Victorian Premier James Munro received a delegation of women from the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). Buoyed at being granted a hearing, they respectfully demanded the same rights and privileges as their brothers, arguing that a government 'of the people, by the people, and for half the people, should mean all the people and not one half.'[12]

Premier Munro was less convinced and challenged them to show they had support from other women. They responded with enthusiasm, and within five weeks collected 33,000 signatures from women across the colony.

This 1891 'monster petition', as it came to be known, made limited difference in the short term but served to underscore the prolonged struggle involved in securing the right to vote. For suffrage leaders, winning the vote was a politics of attrition.

Patriarchal themes played out over the many years of debate. Women belonged only to the domestic sphere in what was a 'natural', God-given order:

> I do not wish to see women unsexed. I believe in the idea, which almost all men possess, of woman being the weaker vessel and dependant on man; and I believe that she could not make laws for the country better than we can make ourselves, subject, as we are, to the influence of woman in her highest and noblest sphere of life.[13]

Women advocating equality, said the men, were filled with radical, preposterous ideas which would end civilisation as men knew it:

> These are the worst form of socialists. Their idea of freedom is polyandry, free love, lease marriages, and

> so on … Are we to allow women who would sap the very foundation of a nation to have votes?[14]

Women who 'left' their homes to campaign for the vote were relentlessly pilloried, characterised as strident and shrill, ugly old maids, creatures of doubtful gender, dangerous, morally degenerate, intent on emasculating their husbands and destroying family life.

To some commentators, it was a disgrace to the manhood of the country that female enfranchisement was even considered:

> Born a man, I mean to die a man … I mean to preserve my masculinity, and so long as I am a man, I will never do anything … which will have the effect of putting women in the position of rulers of this country.[15]

For their part, the minority group of sympathetic men who backed calls for women's voting rights were scorned as being weak-kneed and weak-headed members of their sex.[16]

Despite the best efforts of anti-suffrage petitioners Freda Derham and Carrie Reed, both daughters of Victorian Upper House conservatives, the support for suffrage among women at all levels of society was strong. They formed suffrage leagues. Leaders travelled thousands of miles criss-crossing the colonies. They lobbied and formed deputations, all the while dealing with the manoeuvring and the shifting political alliances of men in power who were given to evasion, prevarication and changes of mind.[17]

Suffragist campaigner Vida Goldstein later reflected on the lack of opposition from women. Everywhere the petition canvassers had gone, she wrote, 'they found the great majority … in favour of the vote, and of being on a footing of equality with men in every respect.'[18]

In the decades towards the end of the 19th century, colonial societies were developing quickly, economically and industrially. More women were moving into low-waged work. From 1880 those from more middle-class backgrounds could seek greater independence when the bar to women accessing higher education was lifted after institutions such as the University of Melbourne allowed women to enrol.

Significantly, the demand for female suffrage was triggered not so much by enthusiasm for democratic rights per se but rather as a political 'weapon' of response to address the culture of sexual violence against women and the failure of public authorities to adequately protect women from such assaults.

In co-founding the first suffrage league in Australia in 1884, Henrietta Dugdale observed caustically that 'the laws for offences against property were very severe, but for brutal offences against women they were not.'[19]

Societies evolve and change. Internal tensions, contested beliefs and values, cracks in the social fabric and new ideas give rise to altered practices, modified rules and different ways of doing. The patriarchal world of the late 19th century was now under unimaginable, unforeseen and mounting pressure to change. Increasing numbers of disparate women felt keenly their economic, social and political inequity, and from the 1880s onwards they gave increasing voice to their concerns and became politically more active.

Writer and feminist activist Louisa Lawson (also mother of Henry) captured the sentiments of many. She dreamed of being enfranchised and of fighting and struggling for better conditions for women. In a major suffrage speech in 1891, she declared:

> If we are responsible for our children, give us the power and sacredness of the ballot, and we will lift ourselves and our brothers to a higher civilisation.[20]

In fighting for suffrage, women did not get to choose the terms of engagement, entering as they did into a political system not of their making. They were seeking freedom in a man's world.[21] But despite vitriolic attacks and powerful resistance, they were not to be denied. Over the next decade or so, each colony introduced legislation to enfranchise women. With the power and sacredness of the ballot now in their hands as well as men's, women believed a better world for all beckoned.

* * *

She embarked on the journey full of hope and expectation. Her husband in the driver's seat, her role was to look after the young charges packed in the back. Getting away at daybreak, their intent was to put many miles behind them. She had acquired a newly-minted roadmap which showed the way to the destination of great promise. Buoyed by what lay ahead, the possibility of uneven road conditions was the furthest thing from her mind.

* * *

The vote and the Women's Movement

The protracted struggle to win the vote had laid the foundations of a broadly defined women's movement with clear goals. Women wanted action on violence; equal representation; economic independence; better working conditions; access to education at all levels; higher wages and equal pay; equal opportunities for employment; and reform of marriage and divorce laws.

The beneficiaries of the vote now pressed on. There was much to achieve. These women were 'self-conscious nation-builders.'[22]

Recognising the advantage of parliamentary power, and with a federal election scheduled for December 1903, Vida Goldstein stood for the Australian Senate, the first woman to do so. An Independent candidate, she felt strongly that women should not take up membership of the established political parties because they represented the status quo and male domination.[23]

Aware of the need to establish their own platforms, women founded new organisations, many of which attracted memberships in the thousands. As early as 1902, the National Council of Women of Victoria, an umbrella organisation, had 35 affiliated women's organisations. The Victorian Branch of the Housewives' Co-operative Association enjoyed a membership of 20,000 in the 1920. This grew to 77,000 by 1938 (of a national total of 115,000.[24]

Organisational capacity enabled large-scale conferencing, a crucial means of mobilising, lobbying and networking for change. While many of these organisations were not outwardly feminist, there were significant cross-class political alliances, such as the movement around the right of mothers to a motherhood allowance.[25]

Women were insistent in appointing females to key positions such as gaol matrons, police, and factory inspectors, in the knowledge that they would better deal with vulnerable women.[26]

Women further developed, and flexed, their industrial muscle, forming over the years more and more unions — such as the Women Bookbinders' Union, the Laundresses Union and the Women Cigarette Workers' Union.

They continued to agitate for equal pay, lobbying and holding rallies as early as 1913 in Melbourne. Twenty-five years on, Muriel Heagney helped establish the Council for Action for

Equal Pay and was its driving force as honorary secretary-treasurer from 1939 until its demise ten years later.

Economic independence was key. In the mid-1920s, Victorian labour organiser Jean Daley argued that women 'who economically depended on men, moulded themselves to his desire.'[27] Every woman, she concluded, should encourage her daughter to be self-supporting. In the late 1930s, Jessie Street, prominent feminist and president of the organisation, United Associations, argued in a pamphlet about married women and economic independence that the right to an income was 'the very foundation of human liberty.'[28]

Reforms and legal changes

Concern for maternal and child health was paramount. Early in the 19th century, Prime Minister Fisher had noted with alarm that statistics show that maternity is more dangerous than war. Women lobbied for a pure milk supply to help prevent baby deaths; and for a Maternity Allowance, which was introduced in 1912. At five pounds for all white mothers on the birth of each baby, it was the equivalent of four weeks' wages for a woman working in a factory.[29]

Women fought for custody rights of their children. While widows could become their children's legal guardians in 1916, it took until the 1930s and 1940s for women with husbands still alive to win equal custody rights in law.[30]

Women were breaking new ground in centuries-old male professions, such as the law, and for good measure, were meeting with sexist resistance.

They took to the global stage, using international forums and conferences to register and seek support for their causes. Australian women embraced enthusiastically the League of Nations, which had formed in 1920. In 1929, Sydney feminist Linda Littlejohn travelled to Berlin to attend the founding of

Open Door International (ODI) for the Economic Emancipation of the Woman Worker.[31]

An exclusionary clause, extant for 50 years, had deemed Victorian women ineligible for municipal election in company with 'uncertificated bankrupts, insolvents, traitors, felons, perjurers, criminals or insane people.' It was repealed in 1914.[32] Thereafter, women started a slow march into local government.

Decade after decade, women kept pressing, unsuccessfully, for the right to serve as jurors.

Similarly, equality advocates called unsuccessfully over many decades for the removal of the Commonwealth Government's ban on married women employees, which had been in place since 1902. They met with prevarication.

Aboriginal rights

Women campaigned for Aboriginal rights. In 1927, the Women's Non-Party Association added the 'furtherance of the welfare of aboriginal women and children' to its stated objects.[33] Through the 1930s, Mary Bennett and others were proving effective campaigners for Aboriginal rights, such that Western Australia's Chief Protector Neville responded:

> While I have every admiration for the praiseworthy work of Mrs Bennett … and others similarly situated, it would appear that the cause of the aborigines cannot be advanced by wild unsubstantiated statements.[34]

But Australian women also mirrored their society's ambivalence toward racial dispossession. Issues regarding the status and rights of Aboriginal women at times generated acrimony and splits in women's groups.[3]

* * *

'Are we there yet?' came the plaintive whimper from the back. Their journey had started ages ago. The progress was slow

and tiring. He was still doing all the driving. She turned to them, noticed the juice stains and crumbs on their laundered shirts, and offered a weary reassurance that there was a way to go yet. She reminded herself of the destination of great promise; and downplayed in her mind the road signs indicating slowed traffic ahead.

* * *

The first female politicians

In 1943, almost half a century since women's suffrage was settled, Enid Lyons and Dorothy Tangney entered Australia's federal parliament, the first women to do so. They were the only two to succeed in what had been a concerted interstate effort to elect women, organised by the Women for Canberra movement. Nineteen feminists had stood as Independents and Jessie Street had stood as an endorsed Labor candidate.[36]

Enid Lyons, mother of eleven children, cautioned against being seen as a superwoman: 'So many people seem to think that in the short period of one parliament, I shall be able to transform man and all his works.' Dorothy Tangney was a single career woman. Not a feminist, she declared that 'women should work in harmony with men in the business of government as in every other aspect of work.'[37]

In the same year, 1943, a conference entitled Victory in War 91 women's organisations around the country, the gathering was described as the largest and most representative feminist conference ever held.[38]

But while this record-breaking assembly was framed as an important opportunity to chart a new post-war social order, its underlying message was disconcerting. Women's equality goals, identified so many decades ago, remained distant.

Deliberations focused on women's paid and unpaid work; the needs of Aboriginal women, professional women, nurses,

domestic workers and ex-servicewomen and rural and suburban women, young and old.[39] The hundred or so recommendations to government repeated the same calls made over the past five decades — equal representation, equal pay, the right to serve as jurors, economic independence, child endowment, maternity support, child care, the elimination of violence, reform of marriage laws, an end to sex discrimination, and reform of divorce law.

Hope was in the air. Expectantly, some 20,000 copies of the conference charter were distributed to individuals and organisations in Australia and overseas.[40]

Women's workforce participation

Women were achieving higher levels of secondary and tertiary education, entering in increasing numbers the paid workforce and professions, and breaking new ground in many areas and endeavours — in science, medicine, law and business.

Perhaps now, more than ever before, Australian society was ready for change on the gender equality front.

It seemed so in many spheres. Jessie Vasey, a wealthy war widow, began a successful campaign in 1945 to increase the war widow's pension. Protesting that women could lose their meagre pensions if officials thought they were leading 'irregular' lives, Jessie declared archly: 'If a mother is fond of her children and brings them up right, then I don't care if she sleeps with ten men a night.'[41]

Between the 1950s and the 1970s around Australia and after decades of agitation, women won the right to serve as jurors, eroding a long-held belief that they could not be trusted to make rational judgements.

Women successfully challenged long-standing forms of institutionalised sex discrimination. In Victoria, since 1890, the Public Service Act had stipulated that women employed in the

public service who married must immediately retire from the public service. Women started the Temporary Teachers' Club in 1955, a section of the Victorian Teachers' Union, to pressure the union to negotiate with the state government to remove the marriage bar. A year later, the enabling legislation was passed.

Pressure mounted also at the federal level to lift the Commonwealth marriage bar for women in the Australian public service. For the past 60 years, the job of typist had been one of the few occupations available part time for married women in the Australian public service. In 1961, William McMahon, Minister for Labour and National Service — supported by sections of the Liberal Party, female Liberal senators, the National Council of Women and other women's organisations — made a Cabinet submission recommending the lifting of the marriage bar. An Interdepartmental Committee was established (of course!). Five years later, the bar was removed.

Social attitudes

With a different bar in mind, Merle Thornton and Ro Bognor in 1965 used a dog chain and a large padlock to chain themselves to a footrail inside the Regatta Hotel in Brisbane in protest against the law prohibiting women from being served alcohol in public bars. Described in the media as 'wives of University lecturers', they clearly lacked feminine decorum. As feminist historian Marilyn Lake observed: 'Feminism was becoming intemperate and brazen.'[42]

The 1970s witnessed an escalation in the social change vital to meeting women's claims to equality. The emergent Women's Liberation movement, including the publication of such tracts as Greer's *Female Eunuch*, brought new energy to the women's movement as well as heightened outrage. The Women's Electoral Lobby came into being in 1972 with a strong focus on equal pay,

equal employment opportunity, equal access to education, contraceptives, abortion on demand and free childcare.

The election of the Whitlam Government in 1972 upped the ante for women. Sales tax was removed from the contraceptive pill. Refuges were created around the country for women escaping domestic violence — although the number of refuges was never going to be able to accommodate all the women requiring such help (as is still the case).[43] At this stage, access to abortion was a criminal offence; divorce laws remained repressive for women; and homosexuality was illegal. The Royal Commission on Human Relationships, an initiative of the Whitlam government, would blow these social issues wide open and prove to be a watershed in social and cultural transformation.

Gender equality

New legislation and bureaucratic structures were set up to break down barriers to gender equality. Elizabeth Reid was appointed as the world-first Special Advisor to Government on Women's Affairs. She was also instrumental in the Whitlam government's decision to ratify the ILO Convention on Discrimination (Employment and Occupation), in force since 1958.[44]

The Federal Child Care Act was passed in 1972. The principle of equal pay for work of equal value was enshrined in law in 1972. The Commonwealth Sex Discrimination Act came into effect in 1983. Australia's first paid parental leave scheme came into being as late as 2011.

In the face of great public opposition, marital rape was criminalised in all Australian jurisdictions between 1976 and 1994.[45] The use of provocation as a male defence to homicide was abolished in most states in the 2000s, although family violence continued unabated.

Activism on equal pay continued, meeting with government inaction. In 1969, activist and unionist Zelda D'Aprano chained herself across the entrance to the Commonwealth Building in Melbourne in protest.

Equal opportunity and sex discrimination provisions were tested. Star trainee pilot Deborah Wardley (nee Lawrie) successfully challenged Ansett Airlines in the late 1970s, alleging discrimination. The 18-month case included three hearings before an Equal Opportunity Board, two before the Supreme Court and one before the High Court. Women rose in support of Wardley, boycotted Ansett's airline and brought about an estimated earnings loss to the company of some 24%.[46] Blindsided by this demonstration of solidarity, the airline struggled to recover from such a public relations disaster.

Women continued the slow march into parliaments and local government. Liberal Margaret Guilfoyle became the first female Minister in Federal Parliament in 1971. Labor's Joan Child became the first female Speaker of the Lower House three years later. Thirty-six years on, in 2010, Julia Gillard became the country's first female Prime Minister. In Victoria it took until 2012 for every one of the state's 79 councils to have at least one woman serving — equating to approximately one-third of the total number of councillors in that year.[47]

Indigenous women forged an important presence on the international stage in demanding rights and recognition. Kath Walker/Oodgeroo Noonuccal attended the World Council of Churches conference on racism in London in 1968, as well as leading the campaign for the Yes vote on Aboriginal citizenship.[48]

Megan Davis was appointed in 2011 as an expert member of the UN Human Rights Council's Expert Mechanism on the

Rights of Indigenous People (EMRIP), the first Indigenous Australian to sit on a UN body.[49]

Australian women actively participated in all four United Nations World Conferences on Women — in Mexico City in 1975, in Copenhagen in 1980, in Nairobi in 1985 and in Beijing in 1995.[50]

* * *

Steady progress had been made, evidenced by the many etched granite milestones along the way. By now, however, the journey had slowed. There was a roadblock causing long and agonising delays. The children had been fractious in the back but were quiet for the time being. The destination of great promise remained a way off. Although at times she felt despair, she knew there was no turning back. It would be worth it in the end.

* * *

For a century and a half, huge numbers of Australian women have mobilised around gender equality. Five or more generations of Australian women have spent lifetimes striving 'for the same rights and privileges as their brothers'.

Indefatigable advocates and reformers, they have lobbied, led deputations and flocked to Royal Commissions. They have been pained and frustrated by tensions and divisions within the broadly defined women's movement, as well as enjoying the support of men when allied with their cause. They have wrested money from begrudging governments for various of their demands; moved into traditionally male domains, often at significant personal and professional cost; and been scorned in the media. Brave and at times defiant, women have protested, marched, taken strike action and imposed boycotts.

What's changed

Without doubt, there have been impressive achievements. Women can now take for granted a raft of political, social and

economic rights. Many have secured vastly improved working conditions in their paid work and larger measures of economic independence. Women have stronger protections against discrimination. Women's nation-building efforts across decades in achieving important welfare reforms have undoubtedly made Australia a better place. Within a patriarchal order, there have been great social changes that have also improved the lives of men, including earlier historical achievements such as the eight-hour day; and more contemporary ones, including fathers being present at the birth of their children.

But these considerable social improvements mask the unchanged. Despite milestones and markers of real achievement there remain significant barriers to achieving gender equality.

… and what hasn't changed

A 2017 survey of over 1700 Australian girls, tellingly entitled *The Dream Gap,* revealed that while Australian girls aged 10–17 *dream* of being equal, they know the reality is otherwise — in sport, the media, at school and at home. Moreover, as they get older, their confidence decreases. Many believe gender is the biggest blockage to their chances of becoming a leader. When asked what change they want to see in the world, half said gender equality, including equal pay. After inequality, girls are most concerned with being scrutinised for the way they look rather than being judged on the basis of their abilities and talents.[51]

This is Australia's uncomfortable contemporary reality. On the evidence, without seismic progressive change, these girls will go through life without enjoying equality. They will carry a heavy load, disproportionate to men. Is this the kind of life and

future men and women really want for their daughters and granddaughters?

On current trends, their lives will be impacted upon by government policies and practices framed mainly by privileged, white, straight males. They will witness sexist and misogynistic treatment of women who take up leadership roles or speak out publicly.

Despite living in an exceedingly prosperous society, many of these girls will spend a lifetime in paid work for which they will earn considerably less than their male peers. A large number will perform vital work in highly gendered and low-paid sectors of the economy. In managing family responsibilities, many will engage in part-time or in casual employment with few certainties. Most will end up with less savings and superannuation than men for their retirement years.

The unpalatable reality is that more than 40% of these girls are likely to face abuse — physical, emotional, psychological or financial — in their relationships with men.[52] Some may even be killed or permanently maimed by their intimate partners. A large number will experience sexual harassment — on their university campuses, in their paid workplaces, and in public spaces.

Although Australians view themselves a country of the 'fair go', these educated and capable girls will more than likely be passed over for senior management and leadership positions. They will do most domestic labour as well as most of the unpaid work of raising children and caring for extended families. They will mostly bear the responsibility and cost of contraception and abortion (if it is accessible). They will be scrutinised for the way they look.

If these girls are Indigenous or from non-Indigenous minority cultural groups, they will almost certainly experience much more layered, compounded disadvantage.

Along with New Zealand, late 19th-century Australia was a global leader in granting women the vote. Yet in a World Economic Forum ranking of gender equality, we currently occupy 35th position.[53] Deeply gendered economic, political and social disadvantage not only persists, but by various measures is worsening. Why the relatively low ranking? What is blocking the way?

Patriarchal obstacles

The major roadblock is that our society is still imprinted with stubborn hallmarks of patriarchal social organisation. The changes demanded and fought for by women so far have been accommodated without too much disturbance to the deep, underlying beliefs and behaviours of an essentially patriarchal society.

Despite their best efforts, women have been seeking changes from a lesser position of power. Winning the right to vote catalysed their formal democratic engagement, and undoubtedly the exercise of democracy throughout the 20th century has helped women achieve substantial concessions and social reforms. On its own, however, and without underlying changes to our social structures, democracy will not be sufficient for women to achieve equality.

Old habits die hard. The patriarchal edifice of the late 19th century has been sandblasted and become vastly more civilised. But the 'internal' structural arrangements and cultural fittings that advantage men at the expense of women have not yet been satisfactorily redesigned. The culture of male dominance that compelled women to establish their own union in the 1880s

because male unionists refused to admit women revealed itself in the excruciating double standards applied to Julia Gillard when she served as the nation's first female prime minister. It is repeated in the way that abusive social media trolls feel licensed to silence women because they dare to break the unwritten rule that insists women are subordinate and must stay silent.

In contemporary Australia, men still hold most economic and political power. Men mostly pull the levers of policy and maintain control over business activities, not-for-profit sectors and spheres of government. They mostly make the calls on fiscal and budget priorities — defence, education, environment, health and welfare, transport, infrastructure and violence prevention. They mostly determine the shape and outcomes of public debate.

Gendered inequality persists today because our society is still structured and organised along patriarchal lines — in a labour market that advantages men unencumbered by domestic responsibilities; in powerful, deep-seated sexist beliefs that deem women subordinate as well as objectifying them; and in our political system in which women remain minority players.

Radically different rules of engagement are required, along with deep, seismic changes that transform for the better gender relationships, our economic organisation and arrangements for sharing political power.

The effort of women across many decades in seeking equality for women and girls is an inspirational journey on which current generations must continue to build.

We stand on the shoulders of giants — the towering figures and the thousands of less public women. Their stories have always been there but they have enjoyed little recognition on the public record, a public record that remains, as one would

imagine in a patriarchal world, skewed to reflect mainly the lives and achievements of (white) men.

The fact that much of the journeying to date has been a long, tedious, struggle of attrition — with wrong turns, dead ends and slowed progress — underlines the pivotal need for women and male allies to establish a clear-sighted view of the road ahead. They also need to nourish the appetite to go the distance.

* * *

The constant journeying had sapped time and energy. While she had no misgivings about embarking on such a spirited venture, she confessed to some irritation and frustration. Enough of the back roads and the stop/starting. It was time to radically revise the travel plans. The adults talked amongst themselves. From here on, they would share the driving to reach the destination of great promise; go full speed on a new multi-lane highway; and delight in watching the remaining milestones flashing by.

* * *

Collective power

Although we breathe it in like air, absorb it, live it and take it as a given, our society is neither static nor immutable. It evolves by economic, political, technological and cultural adaptation and as people find new ways of seeing and doing. It changes also because people, as inevitable participants, can reject what are otherwise seen as God-given beliefs and behaviours.

Just as we have the power to question, reject and change aspects of our patriarchal world, we also possess the power to determine *how* we might do so. But this must be collective power built by social movements that create the requisite solidarity to contest what is identified as archaic, socially unproductive beliefs and practices.

First, we must reflect on the structures, the less visible processes and the unwritten rules that underpin our male-dominated belief system and practices. We need to start noticing more all those subtle manifestations of subordination and the ways we come to live unconsciously within patriarchal constraints. This is not an easy task; and can be uncomfortable in the face of retribution for straying from what is seen by others as an accepted, ordained reality.

Such awareness helps us understand, for instance, those deep-seated cultural assumptions that condition men to the idea that they have power over women; that the male gaze is entirely 'legitimate'; and as such, licenses them to be marauding males. Women absorb these unwritten rules. They know, almost innately, that there are penalties to breaking them, which is why women freeze involuntarily when subjected to unwanted sexual advances, and why they remain silent.

Men, too, need to deconstruct what it means to be born into, grow up and live within our patriarchal world; to understand how they are stymied (and often damaged) by beliefs and practices that not only demean and degrade the feminine, but also place significant obstacles along the pathway to developing a healthy masculinity. On a related front, they need to name and speak out against sexist attacks,as well as leading the way in dealing with aggressive, violent pornography that ordains as 'normal' forms of sexual behaviour predicated upon the subordination and degradation of women.

Second, we need clear political focus now and into the future. The feminism which took root over a century ago was self-consciously nation building, with a clear and strong push for democratic and legal rights and welfare reform — which were to the benefit of all. Contemporary feminism should also be seen to be fundamentally a nation-building project; prepared

to embrace gender fluidity, sexuality, identity and diversity beyond gender.

The widespread benefits of gender equality are too great to be squandered by inertia or indifference. Accommodation within a patriarchal order has won social and material reward but it is insufficient to achieve equality. The required social transformation can only come about through non-acceptance, and disturbance, of our patriarchal status quo.

While born and sustained within a patriarchal framework, our existing representative forums, labour market, economic and cultural institutions, and major policy instruments are not a given. They remain creations. They can change.

A blueprint for change

In pressing for change, we need to have in direct line of sight our existing unrepresentative parliamentary institutions that deny the lived experience of so many other people, overlook the undoubted capacity women bring to the table, and limit our collective ability to deal with complex social and economic problems. Without circuit-breaking interventions, it will take a further 70 or more years to achieve gender parity in our parliaments and executive government. We can't wait that long:

- We need to focus honestly and not shy from critical examination of the patriarchal belief system that continues to foster and perpetuate the kind of toxic masculinity which brings so much harm to women and children and in the process, results in damaged men.
- We need to have in direct line of sight important economic reform other than, for example, customary debates about corporate tax cuts or tinkering at the margins of our national superannuation system. We need to radically shake up our

labour market, which customarily prescribes women's entry into sectors of vital yet lesser paid work; constrains productivity; and keeps straitjacketing men from spending more time in raising families with the attendant demands, pleasure and fulfilment. Gendered pay equity has to be enforceable by law.

- The age-old division of labour between men and women continues to advantage men unencumbered by domestic responsibilities while economically punishing women because they also do most of the work of raising children. This needs to change. It is in the interests of men's health and children's wellbeing as much as anything else. Our economic institutions such as superannuation cling to outmoded notions of the male as breadwinner, excluding many women in paid work, and helping drive unacceptable numbers of women into poverty in their later lives.
- Our two-party political system is in trouble. There is a deep malaise across our country, in large part because our nation's needs are not being met with vision, boldness, authenticity and responsiveness. We need to identify ambitious and effective strategies that disrupt, and replace, the tired patriarchal formulae that perpetuate white male political dominance. We need, as quickly as possible, gender parity, real diversity and refreshed democracy.
- We need to have our sights set on existing legal, statutory protections for women against sexual harassment which are now proving inadequate in the face of entrenched, unchecked predatory behaviour. Full use of a strengthened law, civil suits and class actions will focus the mind of those who currently remain unaccountable for doing nothing when they are in full knowledge of predatory behaviour.

While this seems an ambitious agenda, it is not impossible. We need to nourish and reinvigorate hope. It is important for women to develop and maintain their networks of support and mentoring; and it is especially important to encourage and support girls and young women now coming through the ranks.

But the significant reminder from the past is that equality will only be achieved from deep changes to our existing patriarchal order — changes made on women's terms as much, if not more so, than on men's.

This will require a significant scaling up of the women's movement which, over the past two or so decades, has become relatively atomised compared with the massive organisational memberships and alliances characterising women's efforts in Australia's interwar years. It will also require a focus on forming smart activist strategies in a lightning fast digital environment where there is a risk of illusory solidarity without effecting necessary change.

It will require considerably greater joint effort where men — in their homes, families, communities and workplaces — readily and in increasing numbers, stand alongside women and step up their efforts in dealing with pervasive and entrenched inequalities. It is one thing to sport a lapel badge or ribbon, pledge sympathy and convey a kinder, more empathic disposition. It is another to make meaningful public commitments to change the very structures that create and maintain gender inequality in the first place.

Equality for women is a destination of great promise — for all people, children, life partners, workplaces, our economy and democratic culture.

Instead of waiting another five generations or more to achieve a better world for all, we must come together as much

as possible around the challenges, change gears, speed up — and watch with delight and satisfaction as the remaining milestones fly by.

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