

“Where have all the women gone?”

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Keynote Address

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Ladies and Gentlemen

The theme of this Congress is “piecing it together: equity, empowerment and change” which is a rather apt one for the subject that I wish to address this morning.

I have called my talk “Where have all the Women Gone”. I hope you will both recognize - and forgive - the blatant allusion to a 1960s hit song. It was a sappy song but its sentiments were worthy. These days we have plenty of sap but perhaps not so much worthiness.

I propose to put to you that as a society we cannot claim to have addressed, let alone solved, the question of equity in the modern world if women are left out of the occasion. That might seem like rather a superfluous observation, even naïve, especially before an audience as savvy as this one. However, assumption prevails that the so-called “women stuff” has all been taken care of

It’s passé, so 80s , that women stuff. We’re all feminists now. All the battles have been won - look at how young women can do anything.

Listen to the prime minister, John Howard on this subject:

‘We are in the post-feminist stage of the debate,’ he said about working women in 2002: ‘The good thing about this stage is that I think we have broken through some of the old stereotypes. I find that for the under 30s women...the feminist battle has been won. That is not an issue. Of course, a woman has a right to a career. Of course, women are as good as men. Of course, they are entitled to the same promotion and they can do it as well. Of course. That is accepted...’

I’m glad he thinks it’s settled. As I argue in my new book *The End of Equality*, I think he is wrong.

Just as I think it is wrong that the term “gender” has replaced “women” in so many areas.

Gender is a nice, safe academic term. It addresses theories, concepts. In the process, the actual facts of women’s lives all too often get lost. It is all very well to have “a gendered perspective”, to understand power differentials and so on, but we should not lose sight of the basic conditions of women’s status - in relation to men, and in relation to the goals we set ourselves a generation ago.

I think this is what has happened.

These attitude and views have provided a convenient smokescreen that has obscured the reality in 21st Australia. Far from women having finally reached their rightful place shoulder to shoulder with men in every occupation and avocation, the reverse is true, the clock is ticking backwards

We cannot ignore the facts of our regression. Despite appearances to the contrary, the proportion of women in full-time employment has not increased in thirty years. More Australian women work part-time than at any time in our past, and more than in any other country in the industrialised world. In a great many cases this is not from choice - they'd rather have full-time jobs - but because of the lack of childcare and other support for working mothers.

As a consequence of working fewer hours most women do not earn enough money to support themselves. Equal pay is a myth. Women are earning less, in relation to men, than they did a decade ago. Women's total average weekly earnings are just 66 per cent of men's. In May 2002 women averaged \$555 per week while men got \$839, and this was a larger gap than ten years earlier.

At the same time, the number of women totally dependent on welfare has increased to an unprecedented degree. There are now almost one and a half times as many female-headed sole parent families with children than there were at the beginning of the 1990s and two-thirds of them are totally reliant on government support. These families receive only about half the income of families with two parents where the women are more likely to be in the workforce, even if only part time.

There are now more divorced women aged over 60 than there are widows and many of these have limited means of support due to lack of superannuation and not yet being eligible for the age pension (due to the phase in of equal retirement and qualifying ages for men and women). As a result of all these factors, there are more women living at the economic margin, or in actual poverty, than ever before.

Many of the services women need in order to be able to participate equally in society, such as childcare, simply are neither adequate nor affordable. There is, in fact, a childcare crisis in this country, with estimates of a shortfall of as many as a million places needed to meet the demand; in addition, the cost of care exceeds the means of all but the most well-off of parents. For many

parents and, especially, for women who want employment, this crisis in childcare is a constant source of anxiety and even panic.

The top ranks of the powerful public and commercial institutions of this country remain closed to all but a tiny fraction of women with fewer than 10 per cent of board positions or senior executive jobs in large Australian companies occupied by women, and as a recent census of the Equal Opportunity for Women in Employment Agency (EOWA) showed, in many instances these numbers are shrinking.

There has been a large increase in the number of women elected to state and federal parliaments but these numbers have not been matched by a corresponding increase in their being appointed to leadership positions.

Ten years ago there were two women state premiers. Today there are none (although there is a woman chief minister - in the Northern Territory). The increase in the number of women entitlements; indeed, the decline in women's economic well-being and the roll-back in women's rights has been taking place while the numbers of women entering parliament soared.

Although we do not often link the subject of violence - both sexual and domestic - to the question of equality of opportunity for women, I feel it is high-time we did. The physical integrity and well-being of many women is being constantly undermined by a huge and seemingly increasing incidence of sexual and domestic violence.

The last government survey on women's safety, in 1996, reported that 1.1 million Australian women had experienced some form of violence in a domestic relationship. In 2001, 13,500 women reported to police that they had been sexually assaulted.

We know from crime studies that this figure represents the mere tip of the iceberg since most sexual assaults go unreported. Using the formula for under-reporting adopted by the Australian Institute of Criminology, the actual number of women sexually assaulted that year could be as high as 90,500 - or about 248 a day. In other words, large numbers of Australian women's lives are disrupted or even destroyed by violence. Often this violence requires them to flee from the violent partner and thus become homeless. This is a high price to pay for

what many women themselves say is often men fighting back against women's equality.

The facts I have just stated make up the reality of women's lives today in Australia. It is not the pretty picture of accomplishment and equality that many of our attitudes suggest. There is not much equity there and precious little empowerment. There is a big case for change, but our first hurdle is to overcome the complacency that seemed to have descended over this issue.

One consequence of this complacency has been the political interment of women and women's issues.

Although we never achieved full equality of opportunity between women and men in Australia, we did for a couple of decades have it as a national goal. It was up there on the political agenda and no prime minister, however conservative he - and the leaders were, and still are, always men - would have dared challenge its right to be there.

And throughout the 1980s and early 1990s we *were* making progress.

Women's journey towards equality of opportunity with men was the subject of frequent government and parliamentary inquiries and reports, newspaper articles, women's studies in tertiary institutions and some schools and each year a number of books on the subject were published. There were encouraging statistics on women's increased participation in the workforce, women's rising earnings, women flooding into higher education, women's appointments to top jobs.

This is no longer the case. We have come to what I call the end of equality.

Equality between men and women is no longer something we as a society strive for. Not that we ever attained it but we used to think equality was a goal worth trying for and we seemed to at least be on our way towards achieving it.

Today, we have stopped even having the national conversation about women's entitlements and women's rights. I can't remember the last time a book about women's status in Australia was published. Every bookshop I visit has done away with its Women's section.

(My own new book is categorised by Dymocks as Sociology and is grouped in its online catalogue with other such sociological tomes as *Reefer Madness*, *Fat Land*

and *The Bitch in the House!* Once it stops being a New Release, I shudder to think where the book will end up in bookshops).)

Women's studies in universities seem to have been superseded by the less specific subject of 'gender' where women are no longer the focus of special scrutiny. Newspapers by and large consider stories about women's equality as irrelevant and passé; to the extent they publish anything at all, they are more concerned with individual achievements or with the subject of women's maternal status.

The federal government has abolished or enfeebled all of the agencies that once argued for women's equality and monitored women's progress. The government no longer publishes reports that measure women's progress, and there has not been an inquiry into any aspect of women's equality for at least ten years.

By the end of John Howard's first year as prime minister, most of the voices for women within the federal bureaucracy had been silenced or stifled. The Office of the Status of Women had had its staff and its budget cut and the government had put in charge a woman who had no experience or expertise in the area. It soon lost any influence or any bureaucratic clout. There was no Sex Discrimination Commissioner, the Women's Bureau in the Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs had been abolished and the government had made a serious effort to shut down the Affirmative Action Agency.

It was perhaps not surprising that the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) was firmly in the government's sights. This agency had statutory responsibility to take action on complaints of discrimination on the grounds of sex, race or disability. Over its ten-year existence it had handled thousands of complaints, and had provided remedies and a degree of justice to a great many of these complainants.

Before the *Sex Discrimination Act (SDA)* which HREOC administered, there had been no federal protection for women against discrimination in employment or education or elsewhere because of their sex or their marital status or because they were pregnant. Also, there had been no protection against sexual harassment, which was - still - scandalously common in the workplace.

By establishing HREOC, the Hawke government had sent a strong signal to the Australian people that it believed their rights deserved to be protected. In 1996, the Howard government sent a very different signal by cutting HREOC's budget by a staggering 40 per cent. This meant that one-third of its staff had

to go. At the same time, the human rights branch in the attorney-general's department had its staff cut from 21 to 5.

The government did not stop there.

The prime minister publicly accused the Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Sue Walpole, of being 'a Labor stooge', thereby in effect forcing her from office. She resigned in February 1997.

The job stayed vacant for fourteen months. This was an extraordinarily long time for there to be no one in the position, and it was hard not to be suspicious that the government was casting round for ways to abolish the position altogether.

After all, the government *had* tried to merge the Sex Discrimination Commissioner role, the Affirmative Action Agency and OSW. It evidently thought that if it grouped all its women's business in one location it would be easier to control - or even eliminate.

In 1996 the government slashed into HREOC's powers, stripping it of the ability to conduct public hearings, and taking the complaint-handling powers away from the individual commissioners (sex, race and disability.) Public hearings under the three acts would henceforth be in the Federal Court where proceedings are much more formal - and very expensive. Complainants were required to lodge a \$1000 filing fee in the Federal Court and because the 1996 budget had cut \$120 million from the Legal Aid budget, there was little chance of low-income complainants getting any assistance with this fee.

The complaint-handling powers were bestowed on the president of the commission, thereby weakening the individual commissioners who lost not just a major part of their jobs but also the specialised research and knowledge of trends in discrimination that came with hands-on complaint handling.

Within three years of the commissioner losing her complaint-handling powers, the number of complaints under the *SDA* had dropped from more than 2000 a year to just over 300. It would be nice to think this was the result of a dramatic decline in discrimination against women but we know that, unfortunately, was not the reason. This was yet another example of government actions designed to remove women's issues from public view.

It is no coincidence that yet again the attack was largely against women's rights in employment. The Howard government seemed to think that it did not matter if women suffered discrimination or harassment in the workplace.

Perhaps the most ominous of all the announcements of the new Howard government in 1997 was that which declared a review of the Women's Bureau in the Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs.

For more than thirty years the Women's Bureau had tracked trends in women's employment and had, in particular, been a strong advocate for equal pay. It existed within the bureaucracy long before other women's policy advice mechanisms, such as OSW, had been created and had done an effective job in monitoring women's employment and remuneration. That it was being reviewed was worrying. Without this kind of knowledge base and the specialist policy focus that comes from concentrating on a particular area, expertise soon wanes and is rapidly lost. And without the expertise, it is impossible to monitor trends, detect changes and analyse their impact.

Equally important is the symbolic value of such an office. It proclaims that the government cares about working women and is interested in their welfare.

The bureau had been established as a political gesture by John Howard's political mentor, Sir Robert Menzies. Now a very different political message was being sent when, a few months later, the government announced the bureau's abolition. Its functions were being 'mainstreamed', the minister announced, using the jargon of the day. In future, all work to do with monitoring women's employment would be handled by the department as part of its usual work.

In the seven years since the Bureau was abolished, the Department has apparently published some documents relating to women's employment although these are extremely difficult to track down, even on the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations' own website where I could not find any references to publications since 1999.

The detailed information on employment, including women's employment, that used to be collected by the Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey is no longer available. The last such survey, which included detailed data on the availability of paid maternity leave, was conducted in 1995.

And just to hammer one final nail into the coffin containing the knowledge base about women that had been so painstakingly built up during the 1980s and earlier, the 1996 budget also abolished the Women's Statistics Unit in the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS).

This unit had been a joint venture between OSW and the ABS and it produced some splendid publications such as the *Australian Women Year Book*, a compendium of statistical information about women. The book tracked all sorts of trends in areas such as women's employment, wages, contribution to family incomes, women on boards, indigenous women, violence against women and a host of other key indicators of women's status.

Without such information, it was impossible to track women's progress. The government had culled the agencies that monitored women's status, had enfeebled the agency charged with protecting women's rights and had placed all powers concerning the status of women in the hands of a person who was deemed to be politically reliable but when it came to women's policy and what the government was doing (or destroying) demonstrably did not know what she was talking about. There could be no clearer sign of the status women enjoyed under the Howard government.

Next, women's organizations were defanged and I think it is what happened here that ought to be a lesson, and a warning, to all non-government organizations.

Currently, the government's charities legislation is causing great concern to NGOs, as is the setting up and funding of the Not For Profit Council of Australia. NGOs should look at what happened to women's organizations in this country - and what happened to the status and standing of women. I think you can make a direct connection between the two.

Women have gone from the political radar in part because the organizations whose function it was to keep the government honest in this area had been muzzled.

Since 1966 the government has funded four major women's organizations - and has consistently refused to fund WEL, the one consistently feminist

organization and the one most likely to speak out against the downgrading of women's status.

As a condition of receiving government funding, those women's organizations have to sign an agreement that they will not put out any press releases that are approved in advance the government.

It is difficult to think of a less democratic arrangement - or one more likely to stifle criticism of the government.

The frightening thing is that it has been very successful. We have reached the end of equality. Time to turn the clock forward.

The same fate threatens to engulf other sectors of the NGO world

The charity legislation of what the government did to women's groups in 1996 and subsequently