

Women: Connecting to our past, creating our future

By

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International Women's Day Address
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Happy International Women's Day everyone! (We are a bit early, as the actual day is March 8, which means you can celebrate again on Saturday.)

Let me begin by sharing with you a little of the history of this day.

It began one hundred years ago in New York with a protest by 15,000 women who marched for the right to vote, a decent wage and an end to sweat shops and child labour.¹

The next year, 1909, to commemorate that march, the Socialist Party of America declared the first National Woman's Day (NWD) which was to be observed across the United States on 28 February. Women continued to celebrate NWD on the last Sunday of February until 1913.

¹ All information is from the official UK IWD site: www.internationalwomensday.com

In 1910 at a Socialist International meeting in Copenhagen, an International Women's Day of no fixed date was proposed to honour the women's rights movement and to assist in achieving universal suffrage for women. Over 100 women from 17 countries unanimously agreed the proposal.

Following the decision agreed at Copenhagen in 1911, International Women's Day (IWD) was honoured the first time in Austria, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland on 19 March. More than one million women and men attended IWD rallies campaigning for women's rights to work, vote, be trained, to hold public office and end discrimination.

Less than a week later on 25 March, the tragic 'Triangle Fire' in New York City took the lives of more than 140 working women, most of them Italian and Jewish immigrants. This disastrous event drew significant attention to working conditions and labour legislation in the United States that became a focus of subsequent International Women's Day events.

Campaigning for peace on the eve of World War I, Russian women observed their first International Women's Day on the last Sunday in February 1913. In 1914 further women across Europe held rallies to campaign against the war and to express women's solidarity.

Then in 1917, on the last Sunday of February, Russian women began a strike for "bread and peace" in response to the death over 2 million Russian soldiers in war. Opposed by political leaders the women continued to strike until four days later the Czar was forced to abdicate and the provisional Government granted women the right to vote.

The date the women's strike commenced was Sunday 23 February on the Julian calendar then in use in Russia. This day on the Gregorian calendar in use elsewhere was 8 March.

So that is how we came to have March 8 as our international day.

Interestingly, the day has evolved from being a highly political, left wing occasion to one that is now more mainstream. These days, governments and corporations celebrate IWD; some countries grant holidays on IWD; everyone marks it one way or another.

It has become an occasion for celebrating women's achievements but also for taking stock, for assessing what still needs to be done for women to achieve full equality.

In this way, it remains true to its political origins. It also dovetails nicely with the theme of today's event: Connecting to our past, creating our future.

So in Australia, particularly in Victoria, in 2008 how are women doing?

This year is the centenary of women being granted the vote in Victoria so it is especially appropriate to look at political progress.

This state was the last one to grant women's suffrage – a full 14 years after South Australia which was the first, although, unlike several of the other states, Victoria did include Indigenous women in the franchise.

Since then, Victoria has tended to be more progressive than most other states.

For instance, it gave women the right to stand for state parliament in 1923, three years before New South Wales did so although after South Australia, Queensland, Western Australia and Tasmania.

Victoria also produced the first woman to stand for federal parliament. In fact, Vida Goldstein was the first woman in what was then known as the British Empire to run for office when she sought election to the Senate in 1903. Altogether she stood five times, each time unsuccessfully. The federal seat of Goldstein, currently occupied by Andrew Robb, is named after her.

In other milestones, Julia Bella Guerin in 1883 became the first woman to graduate from university when she received her arts degree from the University of Melbourne.

Victoria was the first state to allow legal abortion after the Menhennitt ruling in 1969, and the second state to introduce anti-discrimination legislation in 1977.

There are many other milestones, achievements or people I could mention - Germaine Greer, EMILY's List, Joan Child, Joan Kirner - but I will confine myself to a few notable achievements:

- Victoria had a woman premier in 1990 (as did Western Australia) long before other states such as Queensland – and in New South Wales it has yet to happen.
- Chief Justice Marilyn Warren of the Victorian Supreme Court is the first woman to hold such a position anywhere in Australia
- As is Christine Nixon, Commissioner of Police in Victoria
- And let's not forget that three of the four women in Kevin Rudd's cabinet, including Australia's first woman Deputy Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, are from Victoria.

That's the good news.

When we do our IWD audit of how the majority of women are doing, the story is not so rosy.

We know that women still are treated unequally in employment, both with the jobs they get (or, more accurately, don't get) and the remuneration they receive. Women still receive on average around \$300 a week less than men, and the situation is getting worse.

ACTU President Sharran Burrow is releasing a report later this week that shows that women earn 84 cents for every dollar earned by men, down from 87 cents in 2004.²

It seems the higher up you go in an organisation, the worse the pay discrimination is. A recent report from the Equal Employment for Women in the Workplace Agency (EOWA) revealed that women CEOs receive only 67 per cent of what male CEOs

² Samantha Maiden, "Equal Pay still a battle: Gillard" *The Australian* March 3, 2008 p. 1

get, while Chief Financial Officers are even worse done by, getting just 49 per cent of the salaries of their male counterparts.³

As an example of CEO pay disparity, you just have to look at the case of newly-appointed CEO of Westpac, Gail Kelly. According to a Yahoo Finance report at the time of her appointment, Kelly was to have an annual salary of \$2.1 million until January 2010 plus \$11.8 million available in performance-related incentives over 2008 and 2009. Last year, David Morgan took home \$8.41 million in total salary, according to *afrboss* in November 2007.⁴

We know that despite women graduating in equal, or even greater numbers, from universities that they soon fall behind in the workplace. The higher up you go in any organisation, the fewer the women. At the very top, the numbers are pathetic: less than 10 per cent of senior management positions, and less than 10 per cent of directorships are held by women. And the numbers are not improving.

We know that women still endure constant sexual harassment at work and elsewhere. The Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission reported in 2001/02 that there had been a 700 per cent increase in complaints about sexual harassment over the previous ten years.¹

Sexual assaults remain disturbingly prevalent, seem to be increasing and the rates of successful prosecution for these offences is declining. The same is true of domestic violence, a difficult area in which to obtain precise statistics, but we do know that service such as women's refuges that cater to victims report they have never been busier.

We know women are still fired for being pregnant and they continue to be sacked while on maternity leave. This is a blatant breach of both state and federal anti-discrimination laws yet employers calculate that the risk of being prosecuted is so small that they do it anyway.

Even in high profile cases such as the terminating of the contract of Channel 9 reporter Christine Spiteri late last year while she was on maternity leave. The arrogance of these employers is breath taking. Isn't it time these laws were enforced?

[Spiteri has taken her case to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, which failed at its attempt to conciliate, and the case is now headed for the federal court. In papers tabled as part of that case, Spiteri alleges that her boss, the head of News and Current Affairs at Channel 9, told her that in order to appear on air at that network, they had to "look fuckable".]

Discrimination against married women has been a shameful and pervasive feature of employment in Australia.

I met a woman recently who told me of her experience at the Commonwealth Bank when she returned from maternity leave. She wanted to work full-time but was told

³ Catherine Fox, "Female executives working for half pay" *Australian Financial Review* January 25-28, 2008 p. 9 Read the report:
http://www.eowa.gov.au/Australian_Women_In_Leadership_Census/2006_Australian_Women_In_Leadership_Census/Top_Earner_Report/FINAL_REPORT.pdf

⁴ "20 Top-earning CEOs" *afrboss* vol. 8, November 2007 p. 51

she would have to sit the school leavers' exam and then undergo a probation period for six months, during which time she would receive half pay. I asked her when this was, assuming it must have been back in the bad old 1960s. "1986," she said.

I could scarcely believe it: in 1986 I was heading up the Office of the status of Women in Canberra and thought that things were starting to improve.

The Sex Discrimination Act had been in force for two years, the Affirmative Action legislation had been trialled for twelve months in the private sector, including by one bank, and the legislation had just been enacted. Yet here was an example of blatant discrimination taking place that was clearly against the law, and totally against the spirit of equality and opportunity that the federal government was trying to engender in the private sector. And it was taking place in a government-owned entity, the Commonwealth Bank.

Victoria is currently conducting a most-welcome review of its Equal Opportunity Act. The Attorney General has asked the question: "How can we best eliminate discrimination and promote equal opportunity?"⁵

It has been a long time since such words were heard in Canberra, but now fortunately the federal capital is under new management.

Labor policy provides for the federal Sex Discrimination Act to be reviewed and strengthened to take account of changes to society since it was first introduced in 1984. It is likely that it will be changed to protect women from discrimination on the basis of family or carer responsibilities.

Despite the persistence of discrimination against women, in recent years the focus has shifted away from women. For too long, especially under the previous federal government, women's issues and interests were ignored. It is time to change that.

The need is greatest at the federal level where the systematic removal of women's influence and women's protection was a hallmark of the Howard government.

Our society has changed profoundly in the past eleven years – I am referring to changes in status of women policy and associated advice mechanisms. Even at state level, where women's voices are heard, there has been a shift in emphasis.

IT IS IMPORTANT that women's voices are heard when it comes to deciding policies and programs that will impact on their rights and all aspects of their lives and their well-being. We need to be at the table; we need a say.

There are various ways this can be achieved. Formal advice mechanisms, such as the women's offices that are – or used to be – attached to government is one way of ensuring high-level professional advice is fed into the policy-making process.

Sadly, most of these offices have been marginalised in recent years. Nationally, and in virtually every state, the office has been removed from the powerhouse departments of Prime Minister or Premier, usually to a welfare or family-oriented area.

⁵ Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission Backgrounder: Thirty Years of Equal Opportunity in Victoria p. 9

This sends mixed signals.

The status of women is downgraded when the policy-advice function is removed from the most powerful department, and the relocation into a family or welfare department suggests a narrowing of focus to women's family roles, or their dependency on welfare.

I am sorry that the Rudd government has decided not to reverse this trend, although I do welcome childcare being removed from the welfare area to Julia Gillard's powerful education and employment portfolio where, finally, the policy might receive the serious treatment it has long been denied.

A second way of finding out what women want is to ask them. There are various ways of doing this: hold community consultations, invite public submissions or conduct research. In each case, the opinions and attitudes of women are sought and fed directly into the policy making process.

At present, the newly appointed federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Elizabeth Broderick, is undertaking a national two-month long "Listening Tour" in order to tap into the views of women, and men, about the issues that should inform her as she presides over the federal sex discrimination legislation. She is writing a blog as she goes, and thus providing a sense of what she is learning.⁶

She has also set out in newspaper articles what she is learning from women. For instance, she wrote late last year in the *Sydney Morning Herald*:

Four weeks into the job and I'm already getting a general sense of what those concerns are. It is clear both from my own experience in campaigning for family-friendly workplaces in the private sector and from the previous work of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission that there is much more to be done in the area of reconciling work with family life. This became even clearer to me when I had my own children. Women currently bear greater responsibility for family life than men, individually cobbling together precarious work/care support systems and hoping they hold up during times of peak demand. Who hasn't experienced mortal panic when the best laid plans are thrown into disarray because of a sick child or a missing school note?

Women can also be asked via polling or focus groups and this method is very effective in my experience.

Last year the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission commissioned research on "What women want" as an aid to an oration they asked me to deliver in December on Human Rights Day. The results of that research are being released tomorrow.

Regrettably there is not time to go into the findings today but they are summarised in my Oration which you can read on my website⁷ or I am sure they will be available from the Commission, either in hard copy form or on its website.

⁶ The blog can be found at <http://hreocblog.com/category/diary/>

⁷ www.annesummers.com.au

The report is valuable because it provides current information on what women in Victoria think about the situation of women today.

The third way to get advice is directly from women in government. With more women in parliaments, and especially in cabinets and ministries, this channel has assumed greater relevance in recent years and seems to be especially important in federal Labor at present.

Just before the election, at a debate on women's policy at the National Press Club, Tanya Plibersek who is now Minister for Housing and Minister for the Status of Women, made the following comment:

*You would have heard many, many months ago about our commitment to deliver 260 new childcare centres in areas of high need, particularly on school grounds. That incidentally is the sort of smart policy I think you get when you've got lots of women on your front bench and in your caucus. The people who've actually done the running around dropping the kids off in the morning and picking them up in the afternoon, know the value of ending the double drop off.*⁸

We also saw women at work for women in 2006 when a cross party group of Senators worked to repeal the power of the Minister for Health to ban the import of the abortion drug RU486. That action was initiated by women, and eventually was successful when a majority of parliamentarians in both houses voted to end the Minister's veto.

This new activism by women parliamentarians on behalf of women is long overdue, and a welcome change from earlier times when women MPs sat on their hands or looked the other way while a whole raft of measures detrimental to women, including the original banning of RU486, was introduced.⁹ⁱⁱ

I would like to spend a few minutes examining how valuable this channel of advice is – and whether it is sufficient.

There are now ten women on Kevin Rudd's front bench – 4 in Cabinet, 3 in the outer Ministry and 3 parliamentary secretaries. Women are 20 per cent of the Cabinet and 23.3 per cent of the total ministry, the highest level ever for an Australian government.

However, this number falls far short of many governments elsewhere in the world, especially in Europe, where it is now becoming commonplace for 50 per cent of ministers to be women. Even the conservative French President, Nicholas Sarkozy, has almost equal representation of the sexes in his cabinet.

As a country we have lagged badly in opening up the powerful institutions of our country to women but at least since the election of the Rudd government there does seem to be a change of attitude towards appointing women.

We now have a woman as deputy Prime Minister for the first time, and we have women in government in charge of Industrial Relations, Employment, Education,

⁸ National Press Club debate between Tanya Plibersek and Sharman Stone, October 24, 2007

⁹ For further examples, see Summers *The End of Equality* (Random House, 2003) pp 201-2

Health, Social Inclusion, Families, Community Services, Housing, Indigenous Affairs, Sport, Ageing, Climate Change and Water.

That's quite a list, and shows that women are in charge of some of the biggest problems and challenges confronting Australia.

Already, we have seen benefits for women from these appointments.

Julia Gillard has put paid maternity leave back on the political agenda. She has removed it from the political back burner and referred it to Productivity Commission and asked that it report back this year on how a national scheme could be introduced.

Gillard has also signalled that she intends to take on the issue of equal pay. How she will do that has not yet been explained but it is wonderful to see – after all those horrible Howard years – basic issues of equity and justice finally getting serious political attention.

There have been a lot of good things happening, with women being appointed to head up powerful commissions, and so-called women's issues like childcare getting top-level attention.

We have even had the Minister for Defence, Joel Fitzgibbon, making an unprompted speech calling for leadership positions in the military to be opened up to women. I was amazed to read the Minister's speech:

We must also broaden the recruitment pool. Females make up more than 50 per cent of the Australian population but just 13 per cent of the permanent Australian Defence Force. They also leave earlier. Significantly of the approximate 3,500 ADF personnel currently deployed on global operation only 164 are women.

He continued:

By not doing more to break-down cultural barriers - both those which discourage enlistment and those which restrict female progression through the ranks, we are substantially reducing our potential recruitment pool. In the 21st Century women are heading up some of the world's largest corporations. Here in Australia, a woman now regularly acts as Prime Minister. Yet Defence continues to send the subliminal message; "come and join the Navy, Army or Air Force, but don't ever expect to lead your chosen service".

We all currently operate in a strong labour market where competition is intense. Organisations willing to provide talented and ambitious young women with a career path to the top, currently enjoy a competitive advantage over the ADF in their quest to secure their services.¹⁰

So it came as a shock a week ago to learn that this government that is so keen to put women into leadership positions had neglected to achieve anything remotely resembling gender balance in the selection of people to chair sessions at the forthcoming 2020 Summit.

¹⁰ Speech by the Minister for Defence to open the 'Pacific 2008 Maritime Congress and Exposition' 29 January 2008 Darling Harbour, Sydney

As we all know, the government announced that ten men and just one woman would comprise the Australia 2020 Summit Steering Committee. That one woman was of course the stellar Cate Blanchett, an admirable actor but not necessarily qualified to represent the entire female population of Australia at this event.

There was a surprisingly strong and angry reaction to this news. It became a big story in the media and put the government on the back foot in an area where it had tried to demonstrate its equality-promoting credentials.

Some commentators, including some women, have predictably tried to write this whole thing off as a storm in a teacup, as an oversight, as having no relevance to what is likely to be an ineffective gabfest.

Catherine Harris, the former head of the Affirmative Action Agency and the woman who led the public outcry about this, told me last week that she felt “sick to the stomach” when she read of the Committee’s composition.

I know exactly how she felt because I had a similar reaction. I did not feel angry or outraged. I felt utterly dismayed – and a little sick.

Sadly, we have become accustomed to having our history ignored or distorted; we know that our present is still subject to discrimination, violence and enduring double standards. But, we could console ourselves with the hope that at least the future would be different.

Then the government plans a huge event to discuss the future of Australia and women are almost entirely excluded from the running of the event, and are nowhere to be found in the agenda of topics being discussed.

In other words, we are not even going to have a say in our own future. That is why Cathy Harris felt sick, and why I did too.

The media loved this story. Finally, it had something to embarrass the government. But this did not mean the media was in agreement with the women who complained. Rather, the treatment of the story was as sexist as the story itself.

Catherine Harris was invariably portrayed as the mother of Kevin Rudd’s press secretary, rather than as the hugely successful businesswoman and former bureaucrat that she is. The front-page story in *The Australian* on February 27 was headed “Mum’s the word on Rudd talkfest”.

This reminded me of the notorious headline that appeared in the Melbourne *Herald* (back when that still existed!) in 1975 as the government-sponsored International Women’s Year Women in Politics conference was about to get underway: “Mum’s the word as the big yak yak begins”.

Plus ça change, as the French say.

Let us hope that this blunder by the Rudd government will be an early wake-up call that it needs to be mindful of gender balance when making appointments. Obviously, it did not occur to the men who signed off on the Committee list that there was anything wrong with it.

The default position of too many men – still, after all these years – is that you appoint people like yourselves, middle-aged Anglo men, to run things. Until men become

sensitive to what is wrong with this, some kind of formal advisory and scrutiny mechanism needs to be in place to ensure this does not happen again.

I remember when I worked in Paul Keating's office as an advisor on, among other things, women that I constantly had to remind the boys to include women when making appointments. It is a thankless job, because we are seen as nags and we are often resented. Trouble is, if we don't – who will?

And there is still such a long way to go in most areas of Australian society. When it comes to women in leadership positions, where are the women in top jobs in the corporate world? In the military? In religion? There are still many barriers to overcome, glass ceilings to shatter, before equality is a reality in Australia.

Finally, on this International Women's Day, I cannot conclude my remarks without making some comments about the US Presidential elections and the historic bid by Senator Hillary Clinton to become the country's first woman president.

I, along with millions of other women in the US and around the world, had hoped that on March 8, 2009 we would mark IWD by celebrating that there was a woman in the White House.

That now looks increasingly unlikely.

We will know tomorrow whether she is still even in the race for the Democratic Party nomination after the votes in the key states of Texas and Ohio have been tallied.

From being the front-runner and presumed nominee, in the Democratic Party race, she has fallen back to second place and has lost eleven primaries in a row. She is struggling to keep up with, let alone overtake, her rival Senator Barack Obama.

Next week I am giving another IWD speech, also in Melbourne, where I will be able to discuss in some detail the outcome of these primaries and where Senator Clinton's bid is as a result. You will be able to find that speech on my website [www.annesummers.com.au] by the end of next week.

For now, let me just make a couple of observations about what has happened to date.

Clearly Senator Clinton's campaign is in trouble. She has been outmanoeuvred and outpaced by Obama who is a far more charismatic figure than she is, and who has been able to successfully argue that he represents change while she is "old politics".

Pretty amazing being able to portray the first-ever woman to be a serious contender for the US Presidency as "old politics".

But that's not the only amazing thing about this race.

I have been dumb-founded by the double standards that have been applied to Hillary, and how sexism pervades the media treatment of her. On the other side, racism is of course not tolerated.

You might not be aware that currently on sale in the US are so-called "novelty items", the Hillary nutcracker and the Hillary toilet brush. As you can imagine, the nuts are put between her thighs, which are studded with metal spikes. To clean the toilet, you stick Hillary's head into the pan.

This is considered funny, as were the men shouting “Iron my shirt” at her during the New Hampshire primary.

Imagine, as the American feminist writer Robin Morgan has pointed out, if someone yelled “Shine my shoes” at Obama¹¹. There is no shoe-shine kit “novelty item” for sale, nor a watermelon seed remover.

If you Google “I hate Hillary” you will be blown away (in a bad way) by the hatred and venom you find on these sites, many of which threaten to do her physical harm. If you Google “I hate Obama”, you will find that most of the sites have been blocked by US racial vilification laws.

The C word is everywhere. You will find no mention of the N word.

Not that I am advocating using the N word and all that implies; I am merely pointing to a double standard at play here.

I would not argue for a moment that Hillary is not a big girl who can deal with whatever political obstacles come her way. Nevertheless, the almost total antipathy towards her by the media, the refusal of so many men – especially educated, liberal men – to vote for her, suggests that women candidates have to face – still! – barriers that simply do not exist for men.

Some of these barriers are deeply psychological, irrational and would take an army of Sigmund Freuds to analyse. Much of it seems to be about hating women, maybe even about hating your mother.

Julia Gillard knows all about this, of course. She has had to deal with the “deliberately barren” charge; she pleaded guilty to having a too-clean kitchen; and she does not know which side of a BBQ is up. Plus she can’t step outside her front door without a million free comments about her hairstyle or colour.

For women to win high office in the face of these provocations just shows the road for them is just that much harder. And the victory, if it comes, that much sweeter. Again, Julia is now a world expert on that subject!

We will know tomorrow if Hillary Clinton is still in the race.

My fear is that she will not be. And that, all by itself, is yet another measure of how far women have come – but how far we still have to travel.

Thank you.

¹¹ To read Robin Morgan’s powerful essay on the double standards in the race for the Democratic nomination, go to: <http://www.womensmediacenter.com/ex/020108.html>