

An International Women's Day Reflection on
Women's Leadership

By

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Good evening everyone, and let me wish you a belated International Women's Day which of course took place last Saturday on March 8.

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 walked out of their sweat shops and onto the streets and 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.

International Women's Day was declared a year later, in 1910, at a Socialist International meeting in Copenhagen, 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.

The next year 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

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

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. And this is what I would like to do this evening: review and reflect on where women are at in Australia today in terms of reaching the goal of true equality with men.

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

Victoria was the last state to give women the vote but it 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 for Victoria, 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.

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 \$364.40 a week less than men², and the situation is getting worse.

ACTU President Sharan Burrow stated last week that women earn 84 cents for every dollar earned by men, down from 87 cents in 2004.³

² *Equal Pay, stronger rights for women would boost Australian economy* ACTU press release 7 March, 2008

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

She also made the point that despite education supposedly being the key to earning more: "It's educated women who are experiencing the widest pay gap of all with their male counterparts".⁴

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 get, while Chief Financial Officers are even worse done by, getting just 49 per cent of the salaries of their male counterparts.⁵

As an example of CEO pay disparity, you just have to look at the case of Gail Kelly, the newly appointed CEO of Westpac and the first woman to be head of a major bank or an ASX Top 10 company. 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, her predecessor David Morgan took home \$8.41 million in total salary, according to *afrboss* in November 2007.⁶

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.

I understand that this is true of TAFE in Victoria and that there is only one woman CEO in the metropolitan area.

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.ⁱ

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

⁴ *Women earn 16% less than men: International Women's Day – International Pay Equity Report* ACTU press release 3 March, 2008

⁵ 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

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

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 "be fuckable"⁷.]

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 she would have to sit the school leavers' exam and then undergo a probation period for six months, during which time she would receive only 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?"⁸

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

I was relieved to hear the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, say in his IWD speech: "Our core organising principle as a Government is equality of opportunity"⁹. That's a strong and unambiguous statement. Let's make sure we hold him to it!

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.

⁷ <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,24897,23276024-7582,00.html>

⁸ Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission Backgrounder: Thirty Years of Equal Opportunity in Victoria p. 9

⁹ *Address to International Women's Day Morning Tea* Speech by the Prime Minister, Hon Kevin Rudd MP, Old Parliament House, Canberra 11 March 2008 (see www.pm.gov.au)

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 more likely to be 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.

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 disappointed 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.

At the same time, I wonder what message is being sent when the EOWA has been removed from the Employment portfolio and placed in Family and Community Services, the welfare portfolio. How does this square with Rudd's undertaking that equality of opportunity is a "core organising principle" of his government?

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.

The newly appointed federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Elizabeth Broderick, has spent the last couple of months undertaking a national "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 wrote a blog as she went, which provided an interesting account of what she was learning.¹⁰

¹⁰ The blog can be found at <http://hreocblog.com/category/diary/>

She also shared her learnings in newspaper articles; 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 were released last week.

Regrettably there is not time to go into the findings today but they are summarised in my Oration which you can read on my website¹¹ or they are available from the Commission, either in hard copy form or on its website¹².

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.*¹³

¹¹ www.annesummers.com.au

¹² To download a copy of the report, go to:
<http://www.humanrightscommission.vic.gov.au/publications/reports%20and%20discussion%20papers/women%20rights%20and%20equality.asp>

¹³ National Press Club debate between Tanya Plibersek and Sharman Stone, October 24, 2007

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.¹⁴ⁱⁱ

But is it sufficient for women to rely on elected women to fight all the fights for them?

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.

And I think we can be extremely proud of these women, especially the four who are in Cabinet. Julia Gillard, Jenny Macklin, Nicola Roxon and Penny Wong are all, by any measure, exceptionally talented and credible people. For the first time in our political history we have not just one, not just two, or three, but four highly qualified women at the table of the federal government where the key decisions are made, where the future directions of the country are set. Or that is our expectation.

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. Seven of the fifteen members of his cabinet are women.

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, 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

¹⁴ For further examples, see Summers *The End of Equality* (Random House, 2003) pp 201-2

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 breakdown 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.¹⁵

Given all this, it came as a shock two weeks 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.

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.

Catherine Harris, the former head of the Affirmative Action Agency and the woman who led the public outcry about this, told me at the time 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.

¹⁵ Speech by the Minister for Defence to open the 'Pacific 2008 Maritime Congress and Exposition' 29 January 2008 Darling Harbour, Sydney

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. (Nor is education, for that matter.)

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.

And that's the point; we want women in leadership positions, not just for the sake of some abstract concept of gender balance but because women bring to the table a different way of looking at things.

Women *are* different, based in part on our different experiences as a result of our gender, but also because we seem to be hot-wired differently from men. We should complement each other. When we are missing from the equation, there is no chance of balance. I would even argue, there is no chance of excellence – and surely that is the quality all organisations strive for?

I suspect that Kevin Rudd's unscheduled appearance at the IWD official government function on Tuesday was a gesture of *mea culpa*, an attempt to repair the damage. But he will need to do more than make speeches if we are to see real change.

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 education system at all levels? In the military? In religion? There are still many barriers to overcome, glass ceilings to shatter, before equality is a reality in Australia.

Finally, when talking about women and leadership, 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.

Can that still happen?

A week ago, it seemed unlikely but Clinton won convincingly in the key states of Texas and Ohio, together with the small state of Rhode Island and was deemed to have come-back from the political grave. She needed to.

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

Yesterday, Obama won the primary in Mississippi. He was also confirmed as having won more delegates from Texas the week before, even though Clinton won the popular vote. Such is the arcane nature of the primary election and caucus system in the United States.

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 Obama¹⁶. There is no shoeshine kit "novelty item" for sale, nor a watermelon seed remover.

There is a rampant double standard, applied both by the media and by many in the Obama campaign. When Hillary goes on the attack in a speech, she is described as "shrill"; Obama is called "assertive". If Obama talks about appealing to different groups, it is described as "reaching out"; if Clinton does it, it is called "triangulation".

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.

Many women – especially women aged over 50 - are responding in a visceral way to this double standard. I wonder why!!!

To illustrate, I would like to share with you a passage from what I consider to be a most insightful article that appeared this week in *Newsweek*, written by the former editor of *Vanity Fair* and *The New Yorker*, Tina Brown (who is working on a book about Hillary Clinton and who travelled with her in Texas and Ohio):

Cynthia Ruccia, a grass-roots political organizer in Columbus [Ohio], told me that in these last beleaguered weeks, women started showing up in waves at Clinton headquarters—women who told her they had never volunteered in a campaign before. "There was just an outpouring about the way she was being treated by the media," Ruccia said. "It was something we hadn't seen in a long time. We all felt, as women, we had made a lot of progress, and we saw this as an attack of misogyny that was trying to beat her down."

Brown continues:

It's a revolt that has been overdue for a while and has now found its focus in Clinton's candidacy. In 1952, Ralph Ellison's revelatory novel, "Invisible Man," nailed the experience of being black in America. In the relentless youth culture of the early 21st century, if you are 50 and female, the novel that's being written on your forehead every day is "Invisible Woman." All over the country there are vigorous, independent, self-liberated boomer women—women who possess all the management skills that come from raising families while holding down demanding jobs, women who have experience, enterprise and, among the empty nesters, a little financial independence, yet still find themselves steadfastly dissed and ignored. Advertisers don't want them. TV networks dump their older anchorwomen off the air. Hollywood studios refuse to write parts for them. Employers make it clear they'd prefer a "fresh (cheaper) face."¹⁷

I think Brown has summed up well the anger and frustration felt by many older women as they confront their irrelevance – their invisibility – in a society obsessed with youth. Hillary Clinton, aged 60, and running an energetic and forceful campaign

¹⁶ 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>

¹⁷ Tina Brown, "Hillary and the Invisible Women" *Newsweek* 10 March, 2008

for President has become a lightning rod for many American women; they want her to win because she represents hope and possibility. If Hillary can win, perhaps that means women in their 50s and 60s and older will gain some reflected self-respect.

But the race for the Democratic nomination has now reached a perilous stage.

Neither Clinton nor Obama can win the requisite number of delegates to assure them the nomination. The race is just too close. Obama leads in pledged delegates but Clinton has won all the big states, demonstrating she can win where the Democrats need to win in the general election in November. We may well see a situation prior to the convention in August where Obama has a majority (although not a sufficient majority) of delegates but Clinton has a majority of popular votes.

Already the polarisation between the two candidates and their respective camps has become deep and destructive. Each camp is arguing that it has the numerical and the moral advantage and deserves the nomination; the danger lies in the unsuccessful candidate's supporters feeling betrayed and spurned. The enmity between the two camps is already far greater than any animosity towards the Republicans.

It is threatening the Party's chances of winning in November as Obama supporters say they would never support Clinton as the candidate – and many Clinton supporters say the same thing about Obama.

It is in this context that serious consideration is now being given to a joint ticket. But what might be seen by many Democrats as a “dream team” is itself fraught with peril: who gets the top spot, and on what basis? The same resentments would still simmer. Meanwhile, Ralph Nader has already announced he will run as a third party candidate, and could well take sufficient votes away from the official Democratic candidate to give victory to John McCain.

A year that began for many people, many women – myself included - as the year where we dared hope that the United States might elect a woman as President has turned into a nightmare.

Many people feel bitter and upset that it has become a choice between a black man and a woman and wonder at the cruel fate that allowed this to happen. Why couldn't Hillary find herself running against a boring old white man? Why couldn't Obama wait for four years, given his age, and get some experience and equip himself for a more credible tilt?

I do not expect there will be any resolution for at least a month, when the next big-state primary takes place – in Pennsylvania. In the meantime, there will be life and death wrangling about the fate of the delegations from Florida and Michigan. How this is resolved could well determine whether or not Clinton is the candidate.

It is going to be a long year and I expect we will see many more examples of the sexist double standard before the year is out.

Our highest ranking female politician, 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, is that much sweeter. Again, Julia is now a world expert on that subject!

It is a small step, and in many ways a painful one, but at least the road is being trod.

Thank you
